

The Power Of Joy

Texts: **Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11**; Orhan Pamuk, from *The Museum of Innocence*; **Luke 1: 46b - 55**

Christmas is many things: it is the hurly-burly and hustle of shopping malls and department stores; it is the jostling of crowds; it is the anxiety of parties and presents and too much to do; it is the smell of cookies baking and turkey's roasting; it is a fear of the bills to come, or a worry your child might go without; it's the Elf on the Shelf, and the constant searching of both parents and children for the place where the Elf will appear next. It's the jingle of Santa and the promise of his sleigh bells. Christmas is so many things. Christmas connects us to the stories and traditions of the past and creates new memories to carry us into the future.

As I was working on this sermon, I remembered a conversation I had with my father a couple of years ago. He was looking at his grandchildren and reminiscing on a Christmas back in 1965. Back then I had a slightly older girlfriend –she was three -- named 'Weezy Manny,' although her real name, as it turned out when I was older, was Anne Louise Mahoney. Weezy had a kind of rocking horse on springs that not only went back and forth, but up and down as well. It was obviously the deluxe model. She used to ride it in her front yard, and when my mother took me over to see Weezy next door, I got to ride on it, too. I loved that thing. And my Dad was remembering Christmas morning 1965 when I came downstairs at 2 ½, and in particular, he was remembering the moment that I realized that Santa had brought me my very own springy rocking horse. "I'll never forget that moment," he said to me, "because it was a moment of pure joy for you. At last you had your horse." I knew exactly what he meant. I had watched Noah have that same moment of pure joy when he realized on *his* second birthday that he had received his very own garbage truck just like his cousin Jon's. He opened the wrapping and looked inside, and he stood up and put his hands to his chest and said, "A garbage truck ... for me!" It was a moment of pure joy for him ... and for me too as I shared in his surprise and delight.

Christmas is many things, but it is most like itself when it is filled with moments of pure joy, when the unexpected happens and we receive more than we had even dared hope for. Christmas is the song of joy that passes from generation to generation, and all our trees and hymns and stars are but prologue to the gifts we give each other to remind ourselves of the Gift from God that made it all possible. It's possible to lose that joy because we're too busy with

the preparations; we can lose the gift in the wrapping paper if we're not careful. But when we finally stop and notice the final gift of Christmas, over there in the corner wrapped up with a bow, a gift left unopened in so many modern families, the gift to us from God, then there is joy.

Joy just makes you feel like singing, and that's what it makes Mary do in our passage this morning. Just after the angel told her that she would be the mother of the Savior, if she agreed to it – there's never any forcing with God – she went to tell her cousin Elizabeth the wonderful news. And she sang for her a song of joy, about her personal salvation, how the Lord had done great things for her, had blessed her, and had saved her. This is the gift of a savior that comes at Christmas, the gift of Jesus who will work eternal life for us through his life and death and resurrection.

In Luke's gospel, Mary's song is shorthand for all that Jesus will be for any who trust in him; here is the message: God is coming into our world for you, this baby Jesus, born for you, God taking on flesh for you, becoming one of us for our sakes, becoming approachable, becoming like you, like me, becoming a poor woman's son, a baby – the Almighty God is coming, not as a judge but as a Savior! God, so far away in heaven, is breaking through the heavens and coming down, for you, to find you when you are lost, to lift you up when you are fallen, to offer forgiveness to you when you are wrong, to offer comfort to you when you are wronged. God, so hard to find, so invisible, so doubtful, is appearing before your very eyes, to live with you and share in your struggles, to bring healing in body and mind and soul, to offer to death-bound sinners a way to eternal life through faith. God is coming to those who live in shame to bring back innocence, to those who live with guilt to bring release, to those who live in despair to bring back hope. God is coming into this world of suffering and pain to suffer along side us, to share in our miseries, to stand with us no matter what the cost because we are not forgotten, we are not alone, we are not orphans in a cold, dark universe, we are children of the Sovereign One. For you Jesus is coming, for you he will live and teach, for you he will suffer and die. For you he will rise from the dead and come again to rule the world. His mercy is from generation to generation, for you, your children and your grandchildren. All this happened to Mary first, and so in this poor woman's song we hear all the joy of hope and love and peace that she has longed for, and we have longed for, for so long.

In our Western individualism, that's often all we hear in this song. But that's only part of what brings Mary to song, what brings her to break out in joy. Her song picks up the strains of Isaiah's melody, that this is good news for the poor, the oppressed, the hungry, the captives,

good news for the people on the bottom, for what we might call the 99%, those who aren't super rich and powerful, the nobodies nobody listens to, who have no connections that count. Mary's Song is good news for the ordinary Joe, or should I say 'Joseph and Josephine' here, who do the heavy lifting, who bear the burdens of the day, who bear the brunt of life. Mary's song is a song of joy because the promise is that all the good stuff won't go to just a few people, but that the blessings of God's earth will be shared by all, not necessarily equally, but fairly, with enough for everyone. Mary's song is a song of joy because the coming of the Savior means that there will be justice in the world, that no one will die in the street from hunger while the wealthy die in their mansions from gluttony, that no one will be able to fix the system with dark money so that they win all the time and everyone else loses.

It's a song of joy because when the Savior comes, no one will have to beg for a Christmas meal or have to rely on the kindness of strangers to buy their children Christmas gifts, even though those are blessed and holy things for *those who have* to do for *those who have not*. This is a bit hard for us to hear, or at least for me to hear, because even though I'm not the top one percent, I'm also for sure not the bottom one percent, either, not in America and certainly not in the world. I'm not so sure that I would end up better off if the world were turned upside down, as Mary is so sure in her poverty that turning the world upside down would be a good thing. Mary's joy is a poor woman's joy that she might somehow know what it is to share in the good things of the world. Her joy is the joy of those who have never had anything who hear that they are going to receive, not everything, but finally something. Her joy in this makes me uncomfortable; it's harder to share in this joy of the world turned upside down than in the other joy, the joy of a personal savior. And yet if I am to have Jesus as my Savior, if I am to greet his birth with joy, the joy that Mary had, I can think of only one way to do that. I have to make the cause of justice and fairness, the cause of God, my cause. I have to work so that poverty is eliminated, so that the rewards of work are available to everyone, so that every person has a chance to be all that they can be, and to share in the blessings of God's world. I have to work so that if the world is turned upside down, or rather, *when* the world is turned upside down, I don't end up on the bottom, but on top, or at least find myself somewhere in the middle, so that I am one of the lowly who are lifted up, not one of the rich who are sent empty away, as Mary sings.

It seems like a challenge, like a hard thing, but it is no more difficult than the challenge we all have to learn as children, the challenge of sharing what we have with others, so that one child doesn't end up with all the toys while the others have nothing. Just like children, we can learn to share in that joy, the joy of the poor woman, anyway. A few years ago, in the week before Christmas, I was on the phone with a woman who had had to flee her home to protect her

children and herself from an abusive husband. She was living in a shelter for abused women and was afraid she would have no Christmas gifts. When I told her my church would help, she broke down in tears of gratitude, of joy, of relief. And I couldn't help but think, what a great world it will be when at last these things are turned upside down, when it's the abusive men who have to leave their homes and go to shelters to get help, instead of their wives and children. And I could hear in her voice how even the parts of Mary's song that challenge me can be a joy. There are things that need turning upside down in the world, or, rather, that are already upside down, and God's promise is that they will one day be turned rightside up, that everything will be made right.

In a more ordinary way, every time we give a springy rocking horse, every time we see a child's face light up with joy, we experience the unforgettable moment when one who has, gives to one who does not, with no expectations in return, but out of love and the hope of a shared joy. Every time that perfect gift is opened, we experience the world of that poor woman's song, we know what the world will look like when that poor woman's joy is made complete. Every time the paper comes off and a child says with tears of happiness, "A garbage kruck, for me," we experience the shared joy that doesn't count the cost, we know what it is to have less so that others can have more, immeasurably more. And a world turned upside down doesn't seem so threatening any more. In fact, it can even seem joyous. Yes, Christmas is many things, but most of all, it is the gift of God in the gift of joy. Amen