



“Who is this Messiah: Tidings of Joy”

Luke 1:39-55

December 13, 2020

Several years ago now, during our annual week of vacation between Christmas and New Year’s Day, Sara and I found time for a movie. She had actually seen this one, on an airplane, and had promised I would love it. I’m always a bit slow with these kinds of things and, initially, I resisted the selection. To be honest, I was skeptical of animated films. I’ve learned a lot since then! Pixar’s *Inside Out* is not a typical cartoon. The consulting producers included many behavioral psychologists and neuroscientists. The idea began with a father who observed changes in his daughter’s outlook as she moved through her adolescent years.

Much of the film takes place inside the mind of Riley, an 11-year-old girl—her “control room,” where five characters collaborate and compete for attention and influence. The characters are Joy, Fear, Anger, Disgust, and Sadness. Early on Joy, beautifully voiced by Amy Poehler, takes charge as the unofficial leader of the group. If you’ve seen the movie, you know that the characters, and the relationships between them, develop in fascinating and layered ways as Riley matures. This is particularly true of Joy and Sadness. When the film begins, Joy is in constant motion, manically seeking control and blocking any potential pain with the well-intentioned and unrealistic goal of making sure that Riley is *always* happy. But through the journey of self-discovery, Joy learns that she may have something deeper to offer than constant delight and uninterrupted euphoria. Something more than mere happiness. And so, learning from Sadness, Joy gives up the constant positive spin and offers a more mindful approach—accepting the presence of tears and sorrow while cultivating the capacity for deeper fulfillment. As I said, it’s not a typical animated film!

I’ve been reflecting on the complexity of joy in recent months. Of this I am certain—joy and happiness are *not* interchangeable. In my own life, it seems

that happiness is most often the result of external circumstances—I’m happy when life is going my way—and so happiness is always susceptible to changing contexts...it is never fully secure, always at risk. Joy, on the other hand, when I can find it, is a more stable resting place. Joy is an attitude of the heart and is somehow independent of outside influence. Happiness comes to us as a gift of circumstance, and we are grateful for it. Joy, by contrast, is cultivated with determination and intention. Joy is aware of sadness and pain and accepts them without being unsettled by them.

I thought about this difference again as I read the scripture passages from Isaiah and Luke for worship this Third Sunday of Advent—the day devoted to *joy*. I wonder if these sacred words might teach us something about cultivating joy that persists in less than optimal circumstances.

The prophet Isaiah speaks to a people living in exile. The external context of their communal life is deeply painful. They are heartbroken. Happiness is a distant memory. But the prophet urges them to prepare their hearts for the salvation that will come. You may not be able to envision it today, but you must begin to practice joy, even when it is difficult. The prophet proposes preemptive joy—rejoicing ahead of schedule—to sustain the people of God in their most trying and desperate time with a vision of salvation.

Over the years, I have been amazed by the tenacity of joy. So much sturdier than fleeting happiness, joy is able to survive in the most exasperating places. The laughter of a child, the beauty of music, the embrace of a loved one, the serenity of a sunset, the nourishment of conversation, even the healing power of tears...each of these can be a cause for genuine joy.

I’m remembering one of my favorite moments in the life of the church in more normal times. It takes

place after a memorial service when friends and family gather for refreshment and conversation. As we move from the sanctuary or chapel into the reception hall, there is often a hushed and reverent silence, reflecting the somber sadness we all feel. And then, a little timidly at first, I begin to hear hushed laughter. In time, the laughter grows and a celebration begins. Stories told, memories shared. Children run through the maze of suits and dresses. Disrespectful? Inappropriate? Not in the least. The presence of joy in that space does not replace the sadness. Grief is still real and the pain does *not* disappear. But that's the thing about joy. It exists alongside the sadness. It is possible to feel both.

The story of Jesus' birth, as Luke tells it, is set in shadows of death and despotism. It begins with the words, "In the days of King Herod of Judea," and we are reminded of the reign of terror that provides the context for this story. But Luke does not linger there for long. In search of the ultimate example of preemptive joy, he zooms in on two women who are unexpectedly expecting. Mary has gone to see her relative Elizabeth. Both are miraculously pregnant. Whatever else is happening in their lives and in the world, Luke wants us to see this reunion. He wants us to hear Elizabeth say, "as soon as I heard you, the child in my womb leaped for joy." He wants us to witness the blessing that the elderly woman gives the teenager. He wants us to cling to joy at the outset of a story that will have its share of pain and loss and grief.

Preemptive joy, it is embodied in Mary. Mary, who hears the promise of Christmas and responds with expectant wonder. *How can this be? Here am I, the servant of the Lord.* Mary, who will travel to an unfamiliar city and give birth to that baby boy in the harshness of a barn. Mary, who will escape the dark shadow of Herod's murderous rage at her son's birth. Mary, who will live as a refugee in the land of Egypt. Mary, who will watch her son endure the pain of rejection, betrayal, denial, and even death.

Despite all that, Mary receives Gabriel's tidings of joy with a song of praise. Her poetic words this morning are a testament to the tenacity of joy when it is joined with radical trust in God's promise. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." In

magnifying the Lord and amplifying God's grace, she finds true joy speaking God's truth—tidings of joy to all the world. Like the prophet Isaiah, Mary speaks hope for those who need it most. Nothing will be impossible with God. Rejoice!

Mary's joy stands in stark contrast to our cultural obsession with happiness or even blessedness as material wealth. We live in a time when #blessed accompanies Instagram pictures of new cars, decadent desserts, or workout clothes. To be blessed is to be happy—everything is turning up roses in your corner of the world.

So why is Mary singing...rejoicing? Is she #blessed? A peasant girl from a small village. Unmarried and pregnant. No resources with which to begin this unexpected new life. Despite all this, Mary raises her voice in song to praise God. Herald of a new day already on its way. Mary's song is an act of preemptive joy.

The song moves from Mary's own life to God's plan of salvation and redemption, and again we find a radical departure from our human expectations. In Mary's song, the lowly are lifted and proud are lowered; the hungry are filled and the full are emptied; the mercy of God comes to those who need it most. Why? Because unlike the powerful and the strong and the self-sufficient, those who seem to have no needs, Mary knows that the world needs a Savior. She knows that we cannot earn the things of greatest value. And so, she proclaims tidings of joy for promised gifts already on the way.

I heard another version of the *Magnificat* this week, in the voice of a ninety-year-old British woman. The photos that capture the moment brought tears to my eyes. Here is how one British paper described it:

"Grandmother Margaret Keenan made history today as the first person to receive the Pfizer Covid-19 vaccine — sending a beacon of hope around the world that the virus nightmare will end next year. At 6:31 am on 'V-Day,' the quietly-spoken 90-year-old sat back in a chair at University Hospital Coventry and offered her left arm to nurse May Parsons to administer the first dose of the game-changing (shot). Wearing a blue Merry Christmas top, she hailed the vaccine as the 'best thing that's ever happened' and told of her joy that months and months of

isolation were coming to an end. 'I can finally look forward to spending time with family and friends in the New Year after being on my own for most of the year'".ⁱ

Hearing her words, I found myself shedding tears—tears that came again as workers in Kalamazoo applauded the first truck loaded with boxes of the vaccine. Preemptive joy. The tears were joyful and they were sad. So many lives have been lost or upended. Such extraordinary effort. And yet, even against such daunting and at times overwhelming sadness, joy finds a way. It does not negate the suffering or end the pain once and for all. And yet, it persists. And so we who, by faith, see a brighter day, raise our voices in joyful praise. *Here is how my friend Michael Kirby, a pastor in Illinois, put it this week:*

"Just because there is great sorrow, just because there is much to do, just because many are weary, is no reason to deny that there is joy to be found in the hope of transformation...or to deny that we are still capable of awe and wonder instead of fear...We are told that the skies of the northernmost tier of states tonight flicker with the Northern Lights and the two largest planets in our solar system are moving into a bright and shining alignment... last seen by our (twelve-great) grandmothers.

*Arise, Your Light Has Come...
And try though it might,
the gloom cannot prevail,
must not prevail,
will not prevail..."ⁱⁱ*

In the coming days, like Mary, we can choose preemptive joy. Not because everything will be perfect this season but because the promise of God can be trusted in every season. Not because everything is right with the world but because nothing will be impossible for God. This week, trust the persistent power of God. Magnify the Mighty One who looks on you with favor. Repeat the sounding joy. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/health/historic-day-maggie-covid-jab-christmas-b221263.html>

ⁱⁱ Rev. Michael D. Kirby, Senior Pastor/Head of Staff at Northminster Presbyterian Church of Evanston, IL.