

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo  
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Luke 1:39-45; 46-55

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors."

**God-bearers**

Today, the third Sunday of Advent, we lit the candle for joy. So, this week, I've been pondering not only Mary's song but where joy comes to us, and what there is to say about joy, and how it is different from happiness. And in the midst of all my thinking, Joy came, came itself to me, as both gift and surprise.

The first experience was caroling last Sunday afternoon. While we had always gone to Newfield House, where several church members had resided, this year someone suggested that we move the caroling to Brookdale, where there are five people related to our church, one of them being my father. We had a most wonderful intergenerational turnout, kids, teens, parents and older folks, many of them with festive Santa hats and bright holiday clothes. I chose not to stand and sing with the group but to sit with my Dad, sitting among the other residents gathered in the common room. My Dad isn't his usual talkative self anymore, but he sang along, and smiled, and really enjoyed the kids, so many kids. Thank you Marna and Barbara for organizing it – and thank you all you singers!

The second "joy spot" this week happened on a busy day in the office. In the morning a call came in from someone wanting to know how things were with the Good Samaritan Fund, our fund where we assist people with rent, utilities, or other necessities. Fine I said. Well let me know if you need a check, this person said. A few hours later a woman walked in who was moving to this area, fleeing a situation of domestic abuse. She would find a job here, she is a Certified Nursing Assistant, and there's lots of places for that here, but moving costs a lot and she had found an apartment but was short, quite a bit short, on first and last month's rent. A quick

phone call to the generous giver, a few phone calls to some of the other area churches who would join us, and we were able to say yes. Yes, we can help you. It is our joy to help you, to offer encouragement where it has been hard for so long.

My third joy spot was closer to home, right at our breakfast table in fact. I had both my brothers in town – in fact, they had spent the night so that we could celebrate my father’s birthday with a lunch out. My brothers knew the bird feeder story – how a nor’easter slammed the bird feeder my husband had installed into our kitchen window, placed a little too close it was, and how a big hawk ate his little bird breakfast in our yard one day, which kind of explained why our newly re-installed feeder wasn’t getting very many customers.

Suddenly this Friday morning, as we ate breakfast, the back yard was full of birds. Cardinals, finches, robins, woodpeckers --the trees were full of birds, darting back and forth to that feeder... a real show of nature’s glory, with nary a hawk to be seen. We spoke of parents who always fed the birds, who taught us to appreciate nature’s beauty. Then my brother who is the most business-minded of us all spoke of how in moments, when you think about the extravagance of nature, thousands of varieties of birds, butterflies, flowers you wonder how anyone could think there is not a master creator.

Each of these things brought joy to me. And joy, good friends, is meant to be shared.

Which brings us to Mary and Elizabeth, most particularly Mary -- Mary and her joy. No sooner does the Angel Gabriel deliver the surprising news that she is to be the mother of Jesus that she is to be this God-bearer (*theokotos* if you’d like the word in Greek) then Mary picks up and goes to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth, who is also in the midst of a most unusual pregnancy. The two come together, and Elizabeth says the baby in her womb leapt in recognition. Right then and there, as Luke tells it, Mary speaks her joy. Not a momentary fleeting joy, but something that comes from deep within her, from her sense of who God is, and how God is at work in her and in the world. What she says is called “The Magnificat” – from the verb, in Latin, found in the very first line: *My soul magnifies my God, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*

One of the things we note about Mary’s song, her words is that they begin personally, with her joy in what is going to happen to her, that she will be called blessed – but they quickly move to God and what God is going to make happen for all people. Her joy is personal; it is communal. Her song reminds us that joy comes when the personal, the individual self-connects with others, that there is this deeply communal quality to joy.

But let’s go deeper than that. When we pay attention to Mary’s words, to the message she is proclaiming, we see and hear a powerful preacher. Mary is not all demure obedience, a kind of ideal for women that makes some of us chafe. The God

Mary knows and lifts up is a God who is going to change things. The song she sings is *bold*.

In a monastery in Georgia, there is a stained-glass window, a rose window, that is set at the front of the worship space. It shows a Mary with her arms outstretched, which is right then and there, something. Pick up a book on religious art, or google Mary later today. You will see that over and over, Mary in a position (often kneeling, head down, hands in prayer, or arms crossed in a gesture of submission) all postures which emphasize humility, obedience, a readiness to be open to God. Our bulletin cover today would be an example.

But this Mary, at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit in Conyers Georgia has her arms opened wide, in keeping with the Magnificat and the God Mary praises, a God whose love extends to all, especially to the broken people and places of the world. And Mary, this Mary has a huge womb, big enough for a grown Jesus to stand within it, a grown Jesus who also has his arms flung wide -- emphasizing inclusion, or maybe it is the cross -- and, as one commentator says, there's room enough in that womb for this grown up Jesus and *for a world that is going to be re-birthed through him*.

As Tricia Lyons Senterfitt says, "Mary's song addresses all the ways we foolishly set ourselves apart from one another, which ultimately is the excuse we need to set ourselves over and against one another. We are all uniquely made in the image of God, meaning that we are to see God in one another, and are called to say yes to justice for all." (*Feasting on the Word, Year B, vol. 4, p. 80*) For years Mary has been portrayed as submissive to God, because of her yes at the Annunciation. But look how boldly Mary sees things. Look how much she says yes to. Mary's song sees a different world, a world that has been turned around, made right. In bible study someone said the song, her words, are about balance. At first, I was confused, but then I got it. Mary sings a vision where the rich will be brought down, the poor lifted up. People will not live in palaces, getting fat while others live on streets or in hovels, starving for food. At bible study this week, I shared this image, the stained-glass window of Mary, the God-bearer describing it much as I have described it to you. (There will, by the way, be a picture of the window at the back of the church at the service conclusion today, for you who are curious) "I don't like this image" someone at bible study said. "I find it disturbing. I want to think about *a baby* in Mary's womb, not a full-grown man!" Well, that's honest. The image, like Mary's song, turns things upside down --- or right side up, depending on how you see it. The full-grown Jesus in Mary's womb is not the stuff of Away in the Manger, Little Lord Jesus no crying he makes, nor is it the stuff of our Christmas pageant, as we look adoringly on children playing their parts. A grown Jesus will make claims on us in a way a baby come into the world may not.

But maybe this is the image we need, in times like these: For the arms that are flung wide, by Mary, and by the full-grown Jesus want to embrace us all, for we are all made in the image of God. And they tell us, these open arms, that wherever brokenness and sorrow remain on earth, there God will be, arms outstretched in

love. Those far flung arms, they help us imagine being welcomed to a new vision, a new way of being, and ultimately, a whole new world.

Today, as we remember a God-bearer in Mary will we consider ourselves as such? How might God be hoping to bear peace, hope, joy and love through us?

Amen.