

Luke 1:39-46
“Joy to the World”
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I want to invite you to do something for me. Take a moment and bring to the front of your mind a time in life when you received profoundly good news. When you have it, I want you to let that moment roll around in your mind and remember the way you felt. I would imagine the word that might come to mind for each of us is the word joy.

This last Summer, our family received unbelievably good news. Amy’s brother John and his wife Melissa carefully orchestrated the announcement that they were going to have a baby. The announcement involved a gift-wrapped package that we opened, revealing the picture from an ultrasound. It was amazing. Then they pulled out a second gift wrapped package, in it was a second ultrasound only at the top of this photo were the words, “Baby B.” It took us a moment, but once we all caught on to what was happening we all lost our minds.

Even though we were all aware that this would mean for these new parents, the joy of the responsibility overshadowed any trepidation they might feel.

In the Scriptures when someone receive news that is profoundly good, they tend to respond in one of a few ways: for Abraham’s wife Sarah it was shouts of laughter at the news of their son Isaac; for old Zechariah it was disbelief followed by dumbstruck silence when he and Elizabeth learned she was pregnant with John. However, in the Gospel of Luke, when good news comes, the most common response is for someone to burst out in song. The Angels, who we heard from last week, broke out in song above the fields; Zechariah, upon the birth of his son John had his tongue untied and he let forth with singing; Simeon, at the arrival of Jesus in the temple; and this morning, as we will read Mary receives news of this birth, she opens her mouth and what comes is a song.

Among the very best gifts God has given his Church is His Word proclaimed in song. Martin Luther said that “next to the Word of God, the noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world.” Which is why, each week during this Christmas Season, we are taking one of our beloved Christmas Carols and looking at it beside Scripture to see how these words handed down in song, help draw us near to God who comes to us at Christmas. This morning we are looking at two songs, which at first glance appear to be absolutely bursting with joy, but with a more careful look reveal a complexity and depth that goes much deeper than surface level happiness.

Luke 1:39-56

I want to ask you now to use your imagination again for a moment, and consider your life, your true self, unmasked, without self-deception. I wonder if you can say to yourself: “God is happy with me, I am the object of God’s favor and affection.” Is that possible for you to say?

Now take a step further out and imagine thinking to yourself: everything in my life is so good, so wonderful, so perfect that it makes me want to stand up and start dancing. Can you imagine this? Could you say this? What would it take for you to be able to? A miracle?

Finally, go one step further yet and consider your whole existence, what if you were to look at it all and what came to your mind is: I am blessed. What would have to happen for you to actually think that?

The Story of Christmas says that everything that would have to happen for this to be true, has already happened. And I'm not talking about getting everything you want exactly when you think of it, but a life that is blessed. In Mary's Song we see a life that is favored by God, life that's truly joyful, someone who is blessed, and yet it doesn't seem to fit our concepts of blessedness. Which leads me to ask: where along the way did we forget or get distracted by what true joy, true blessedness by God looks like?

In today's passage, Mary, who is unwed and a virgin, finds herself in a situation that's not so much heart-warming as it is terrifying. To a teenage girl in this day, this was about the worst thing that could happen. It would have brought shame to her and her family, it would have meant a life of difficulty and burden, her fiancé Joseph would have been entirely justified in dismissing her shamefully. Very simply, on the surface Mary has very little hope of a future, certainly not anything to be joyful about.

And yet in verse 48 Mary says "God has looked upon the humble estate of his servant. Now all generations will call me blessed." Mary looks at everything going on around her and inside her and what she is able to say in this moment is that God has favored her. Mary is convinced that God himself, the one who created the heavens and the earth has looked on her with favor, and because of it she is joyful.

What would this look like for you to believe that God favors you? Have you thought about this? A few weeks ago, I asked you if you've ever daydreamed about winning the lottery. Is this what being favored might look like? Or is favor having a life in which nothing difficult or sad or uncomfortable ever happens, is that what it looks like? Or is favor being the object of other people's good thoughts, having accolades and accomplishments that cause other people to think of you as someone who is blessed and worthy of admiration. Is that what it means to be blessed? In some respects, yes. But is this what God's favor looks like?

I want to suggest that being favored by God does not mean a person gets what they want whenever they can think of it. This message has done great damage to many in the Church. Look at the circumstance in which Mary finds herself, and yet because of it (not in spite of it) she declares I am blessed. Why is this?

You see for Mary, God's favor becomes known to her when she receives the invitation to be God's vessel through which His purposes may be carried out. Very simply, God's favor becomes known to Mary when she accepts the invitation to serve others with her life. When this became known to her Mary experienced joy beyond imagination.

On the surface, Mary's life looks like a scandal, her future will be difficult, even burdensome. She and Joseph will have to explain their situation to their families. They will feel the sideways glances of her friends and neighbors. It will be difficult as they, with a newborn have to flee to Egypt to escape the persecution of Herod. Life is not going to get easier from here, for either of them. And yet when Mary looks at the whole of her life at this moment she declares that: "God has favored me."

And this I believe is the very most important message from this passage for our lives. Favor from God looks like you and me hearing that God has something important, and possibly even difficult for you to do, something that will ultimately lead to the good of others, and something for which my gifts are uniquely positioned. And then you saying: “Yes, it would be my joy for the living God to use me in this.”

This is what God’s favor is, it is an invitation to be used for our truest purpose.

The Author Frederick Buechner has a quote from his book *Wishful Thinking* that I love, he says: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

Mary’s story is so much different from the messages that are marketed to us this time of year, it is no wonder that her story resounds with such a different tone. It is basically the opposite of what our culture teaches us. They say joy is found in things we are able to receive or be given to us, or what we are able to give to others that we have bought from a store. But God’s joy is receiving a calling to do something important for God, and that could be as simple as visiting with an elderly neighbor throughout the week, or committing to volunteer as a Kids Hope Mentor with an elementary student once a week, and then saying “yes” it would be my joy.

You see for Mary and Joseph, for Elizabeth and Zechariah, and for John and later for his disciples, joy and favor from God means allowing one’s life and one’s story to be folded into God’s life and God’s story. And for Mary that meant the call to serve in a way that would be for her difficult, but would ultimately be for many peoples’ good.

I wonder if we have been lulled asleep by the messages of Christmas. And I wonder if what we need most is to hear the sharp, counter-cultural call that the Angels announce to Mary. This same desire to awaken others to the truth of Christmas was felt by a man named Isaac Watts.

Now when you think of the automobile you probably think of Henry Ford, or the telephone, Alexander Graham Bell, well when you think of the hymnal, think of Isaac Watts. Throughout his life he wrote more than 700 hymns, many of which continue to be published and republished in our hymn books today. Hymns like *O God Our Help in Ages Past*, *I Sing the Mighty Power of God*, and what some have called the greatest hymn ever written, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*.

Well in the early 18th Century, even as a young man, Watts looked out over the church’s music, which at the time was the Psalms set to music, and what he saw was people lifelessly reciting words from Scripture and he thought that the church needed new music to revive their worship. Even as a young boy he had a gift for lyric and rhyme. I was reading a story about him this week, one night as the family was praying, he kept his eyes open, and he was caught by his father—who obviously also had his eyes open. When he was called out, he said: *A little mouse for want of stairs, ran up a rope to say his prayers.*

His dad wasn’t amused, but as he was getting ready to scold his son, Isaac said: *father father pity take, and I will no more verses make.*

Well, thankfully he didn't stop making verses, but went on to be the most prolific hymn-writer of his age, writing the most published Christmas hymn of all time, Joy to the World. By the early 1980s it had been published in over 1,300 different hymnals.

Using the words of Psalm 98, it's as if Watts was taking the world by the shoulders and shaking it from its hypnotic indifference, with a startling and reorienting message.

Joy to the world. Why? Because we are able to finally accomplish what we set out to, or get everything we hope for in our lives? No, the Lord is come, he's come to release us from our self-imposed prisons and give you a new purpose and a new mission for which you are uniquely purposed and able to accomplish. Let earth receive her king.

Joy to the earth, the savior reigns; we no longer have to worry about whether the calling or the work that is given to us will be successful or not. Jesus the Savior reigns, and when we have committed to allowing his Word and his Spirit he determines the outcome, and all that is required is faithfulness. Let all their songs employ, fields and flocks, rocks hills and plains ring out with the message they were all made to proclaim, the joy of the Lord.

No more let sin and sorrow grow, nor thorns infest the ground, he comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found. You and I are God's vessels. And though we are cracked and chipped by sin and strife, by grace uses us to shine forth his message over all creation, flowing out over all the places where once the curse ruled. When we accept that, God's joy becomes alive in us when we receive his call to purposeful service.

Now, I bet there is someone here who is thinking to themselves. Yeah, of course Mary is going to accept this difficult service, to which she is being called...she has, after all, the savior of the world growing inside her. It wouldn't be such a hard choice if angels came and asked me to do something by God. But I don't have God growing inside me, and no little angel babies are telling me to do anything.

But I should remind you that the bible says that once you say yes to Jesus and allow him to rule over your life, it says that you now, by the power of the Holy Spirit, have Jesus alive and active in your life. Paul says in Romans 8:10: **If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.**

The son of the most-high has chosen to make his home in your heart, so you may also say that I am blessed because the Lord has chosen to be within me. So what if the world is against me. So what if things are difficult and I don't always get everything my heart desires, my heart is glad because Jesus resides with me. Being blessed doesn't mean we have everything we want for a happy life, but blessedness is having everything you need for a happy life. And because God in Jesus Christ has chosen to come and reside with us through his Holy Spirit we have everything we could need for our lives to be called blessed.

Listen to the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases the words of Psalm 98. Do they sort of startle you into a new hearing of them?

Sing to God a brand-new song. He's made a world of wonders! He rolled up his sleeves, He set things right.

² God made history with salvation, He showed the world what he could do.

³ He remembered to love us, a bonus To his dear family, Israel—indefatigable love. The whole earth comes to attention. Look—God's work of salvation!

⁴ Shout your praises to God, everybody! Let loose and sing! Strike up the band!

⁵ Round up an orchestra to play for God, Add on a hundred-voice choir.

⁶ Feature trumpets and big trombones, Fill the air with praises to King God.

⁷ Let the sea and its fish give a round of applause, With everything living on earth joining in.

⁸ Let ocean breakers call out, "Encore!" And mountains harmonize the finale—

⁹ A tribute to God when he comes, When he comes to set the earth right. He'll straighten out the whole world, He'll put the world right, and everyone in it.