



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Gather 'Round with a Song of Joy

Dr. Jo Forrest

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This Advent season, we gather 'round the manger to see the various people whom God called to bear new life and tell the good news: Joseph, shepherds, and today we meet Mary. In John's gospel, Jesus identifies his mother as "woman," without any name. At least Mark's gospel gives his mother one honorable mention as "Mary." In Matthew's gospel, five times during the story, Mary is identified by name as Joseph's wife or the mother of Jesus, but she never says a word.¹

No wonder Mary holds a reputation of a submissive, innocent woman. She appears as a pawn in game played by others, valued only for her womb.

Thank goodness for Luke's gospel. She enters the story through the familiar line: "The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin."

The angel says, "Kyrie" or "'rejoice' favored one. The Lord is with you." He tells this young teenager that she will bear a son, prompting Mary's curiosity. She responds as a savvy, articulate teen, who proceeds to challenge this angel. What? How? Why? She learns her son will be called "son of the most high" and that she will name him Jesus.

In that culture, women don't get to name their children, that privilege belongs only to men.

¹ Caroline M. Kelly, "Great Expectations: Luke 1:39-55," *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2008, p 15-16

Have you known a head-strong teenager like her? If not, think Greta Thunberg or Malala Yousafzai – contemporary young women who captured international attention by speaking truth.

After digesting the angel's news and agreeing to the plan, Mary offers the longest speech uttered by a female in the New Testament.

Rarely do we hear this text spoken in worship, nor in its entirety.

This year, I invite you to hear the words of a young, un-wed girl, whose pregnancy put her life in peril, and who everyone thought should have been afraid and ashamed, silent, and subjugated to the will of others.

Before I read, please pray with me,

Dear God, as we walk closer to the manger, slow our steps so we notice, clear our minds of past presumptions, and let us take in the wonder of Jesus' birth. Make space in our hearts and minds for your words to startle us again with a joy only you can provide. Enter our lives as you entered Mary's so that we lift our voices in songs of praise. Amen.

Luke 1: 46-55

⁴⁶ And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of this servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ God's mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

The third Sunday of Advent brings us closer to the manger and the reality of God's incarnate presence. This period of waiting and preparing for Christ's birth is intended to discipline us for that divine encounter.

We turn from the blinking lights and the shiny tinsel to read the ancient stories once again of those people who heard God's invitation, and we might find ourselves saying "yes" as well.

In Advent we began with hope, encouraging us to look honestly at our present circumstances and trust God can bring new life in the future.

The second week of Advent invites us closer if we can embrace divine peace. This peace demands that we let go of our struggle to coerce peace from others through power. Instead rising from our willingness to see the divine image in one another.

Today the pink candle burns as we step deeper into the very heart of Christmas and the presence of joy.

Here is where we meet Mary.

Here is where I get to tell the old joke about Protestants and Mary. It goes something like this: One of us crosses from death to life eternal and meets our savior face-to-face. Jesus welcomes us, shows us around, and says, “may I introduce you to my mother, Mary, I don’t think you know anything about her.”

Unlike the orthodox traditions, rarely do we speak of Jesus’ mother, perhaps rejecting those traditions that venerated her as otherworldly, or we may avoid her for the milquetoast aura of a submissive teen.

Or we might step back from her radical song and the revolution she delights in singing about. Many countries and

Evangelical traditions ban Mary's song. For a host of reasons, she is mercurial or dangerous.

In the intro to the scripture reading, I alluded to Luke's gospel painting as the most complex portrait of Mary. The way in which Luke tells us about Mary, also tells us something about the relationship we may have with Jesus.

In the common Greek language in which the gospels were written, there was no word "Mary." The Gospel of Matthew refers to her as Marias, translated as Mary, and for simplicity's sake this is used in other places in the New Testament when the text refers to Jesus' mother.

The Gospel of Luke uses a different, Jewish name, Miriam. Miriam. By translating Miriam to Mary, we understand she is Jesus' mother, but we lose so much of what Luke intends for us to know. Someone who read "Miriam" in the gospel would immediately think, "wow, something is going to happen." At the time of Jesus' birth, Miriam was a revered name in Jewish tradition, a name of courage, harkening back to Moses' sister as told in the Book of Exodus.

While in captivity, the first Miriam plotted against the murderous Pharaoh. Even though enslaved, the potential strength of the Israelites threatened Pharaoh who sought to suppress them by demanding all the male infants be killed.

Miriam defied the order and sends her infant brother down the Nile River in a little basket. Her plan succeeds as Moses

is rescued and raised by none other than Pharoah's daughter. During the exodus from slavery, Miriam stands at the banks of the Red Sea, banging her tambourine, singing a victory song as the Egyptian army drowns, and Moses leads the Israelites to liberation.

Without her chutzpah, how could the Israelites have secured new life?

Later still, she stands up to Moses' authority by asking "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses: Has the Lord not spoken through us also?" (Numbers 12:2) Miriam is not a demure lass. So, when Luke mentions Mary, think of that Miriam.

The song Mary sings, known as the *Magnificat*, evokes and echoes back to another woman through whom God moved to restore a broken people. Mary learned to sing her song by remembering Hannah's song.

Another little story for scripture.

When the Israelite nation wrote their history book, describing their rise from disparate tribes following the exodus to solidarity and strength, their story does not begin with a man or army or brutal power. The birth of the kingdom of Israel begins with Hannah, a barren woman who will not be silenced.

In this legend, Hannah is a strong visionary who prays with such passion that the priest wonders if she were drunk. From the priest's initial scorn, she eventually earns his respect when she promises that if she bears a son, she will dedicate him to serve God in the temple.

God responds, opens her womb, and the day she presents her beloved son she sings of divine majesty, "my heart rejoices in the Lord" and paints a picture of God as a master of reversals, predicting God will "raise the poor from the dust and lift the needy from the ash heap...guard the feet of his saints and the wicked will be silenced." (1 Samuel 2:1–10)

Her son, Samuel, becomes the priest and prophet who anoints the first king and then the shepherd boy, David, who becomes the greatest Israelite king.

Steeped in Jewish faith, Jesus' mother knows the story of her namesake Miriam and of Hannah. She knows of God's covenant with Israel, and the promises made by the prophets. Other women, Sarah, Leah, and Ruth from the Old Testament bear the future within their bodies, unlikely agents but heroines for courageous faith. Inspired by their songs, Mary begins to sing by rejoicing.

She moves from rejoicing, to sing her son...her son... will bring down the powerful, lift the lowly, and scatter the proud. Confident what the angel predicts has already occurred, she sings of her people restored. Away from power and greed and empire, they will move toward mutuality and mercy.

Mary's song foreshadows her son's entire ministry. In this gospel, the first time Jesus preaches he states his purpose is to "bring good news to the poor...and release the captives." According to Luke, through Mary, God renews the covenant made long ago with her ancestors. And like so many other characters drawn around the manger, she is not someone with status or a platform from which to speak.

Because Mary's song is so fiercely joyful, this third week of Advent may be the perfect week to name and explore the role of joy in our lives. Joy is not something we pursue like happiness. The common question asked is "what brings you joy" not "how do you create joy?" Joy is something that comes at us.

Psalm 30 reminds us that joy comes in the morning, without any effort on our part. Have you seen the recent sun rises? So many horizons burning pink with joy.

Author and theologian Henri Nouwen writes, while happiness usually depends on circumstances, joy runs deeper. "Joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing — sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death — can take that love away."²

²Matthew Myers Boulton's scholarship and podcasts over the years offers keen insight to Mary and the concept of joy we celebrate in Advent. His work is presented through the Salt Project and an example follows:

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2017/12/11/magnificat-lectionary-commentary-for-advent-week-three>

Through the contours of her song, Mary shows us that in order to receive joy, we recognize that we, ourselves, are important parts of God's ongoing story, the ongoing work to redeem this world for all people to thrive. This is the message Luke offers about Mary and about the relationship we may have with her son, our savior. The angel came to Mary with the frightening invitation to remember the bravery of those in the past and be the bearer of new life. It brought hardship and joy.

Joy comes at us as well, perhaps with similar pain of childbirth, for us to bear new life. May we rejoice.



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2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org