Unexpected Joy, Advent 3

Luke 1:39-55, Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Just a few moments ago, we lit the Advent candle of joy. Just a few moments ago we sang, "Joy to the World, the Lord is come we, Let Earth receive her King; Let ev'ry heart prepare him room, And heav'n and nature sing." Looking back on the origin stories of Jesus and John the Baptist – it's easy for us to call these events joyful, but for Mary and Elizabeth – living those days in real time, I doubt that joy was what either of them experienced in those first moments of realization. Imagine their stories with me.

Elizabeth – like most of us ladies in the room this morning – is well beyond her childbearing years. In her day, a woman's worth was tied to her ability to have children, and barrenness was often misunderstood as a lack of blessing from God. It is a burden she has lived with all of her married life. Then one day, her husband comes home – mute - from his priestly duties at the temple – unable to tell her that soon she will bear a son named John. (PAUSE) How did Terrie phrase it in last

week's sermon – today we might refer Zechariah for a mental health assessment. (PAUSE) Then how did Elizabeth respond when she learned the news from her own body? I would be beyond shocked, wouldn't you ladies? I might be afraid to get excited – could the baby possibly be healthy? Could I survive the pregnancy at my age? Would I live long enough to raise this miracle boy? So many questions and so many concerns. (PAUSE)

And then there is Mary – young, unmarried, and claiming to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit (about that mental health assessment). (PAUSE) Her fiancee's first response is to quietly end the engagement – even so - all of it is a first rate scandal in their small village. Joseph gets on board when an angel visits him in a dream, but is it any wonder that Mary still wants to get out of town? On her own it seems, she travels 80 miles to visit her Aunt Elizabeth. Is she looking for a safe place to process everything she has seen and heard and felt? Is she looking for refuge from the prying eyes and wagging tongues? If I'm honest, I don't see overwhelming joy in the early days for either of these women. (PAUSE)

But then the unexpected happens. Mary enters her aunt and uncle's home and calls out a greeting to Elizabeth. When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, the baby leaps in her womb, and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. (PAUSE) Friends, we never know when or where God will show up! When never know when unexpected joy will break through! In a loud voice Elizabeth exclaims: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 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!" (PAUSE)

And what is Mary's response to this amazing proclamation from her aunt? Her response is what we call the Magnificat – and it begins with joy as well! She starts, "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." (PAUSE)

What began as a simple visit by Mary to her aunt has become another in-breaking of God into the world. And in this moment, God gives Mary and Elizabeth two things they both need – connection and community. God removes their isolation and helps them understand themselves more fully as part of something much larger.[i] It is confirmation for both women that not only is God walking with them, but that through them God will change the world. Both women bear the good news in their bodies and both proclaim the good news to one another in this moment of connection and joy. The coming of the Messiah is anticipated and proclaimed not by high priests, emperors, or even ordained preachers – rather it is proclaimed by two marginalized, pregnant women – one young, poor and unwed, one far beyond the age to conceive. (Pause) Unexpected joy.

(PAUSE) As moving and joyful as this moment is, thankfully, it is not the end of the story, there is more to come as Mary's words next words become prophetic. Hear them again now: God's 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." (PAUSE)

In no uncertain terms, Mary proclaims that Jesus' arrival will be joyful good news, but it will be subversive – politically, socially, and economically, going as far as to threaten those who are in power. Her joy is not a feeling, it is faith made visible. It is the choice to celebrate what God is birthing **in spite of empire**. Mary and Elizabeth's joy is not the absence of hardship, but it reflects the in-breaking of God's kingdom through courageous solidarity. (PAUSE)

So what does this mean for all of us today? We all have the need to connect more deeply with each other. In an online devotional titled Unsettled Advent, John McClellan wrote this week, 'Americans increasingly feel isolated from one another. With fewer neighbors to share stories in common, a 2025 American Psychological

Association study found that people who experience regular loneliness struggle with their physical and mental well-being much more than those with low loneliness levels. In the midst of this growing isolation, a near-unanimous solution emerged: 92% of adults surveyed see "relationships" as the way out of our social malaise. That is, we all get it: We need connection, we need one another.

When commonality disappears, he continued, we tell abstract stories about those we do not know and often fear, relegating entire communities of real people to spaces of what Lisa Marie Cacho's calls, "social death." Our distance from other communities has allowed common social narratives to spread in which nonwhite people and immigrants are flattened into caricatures. These stories morph then morph entire people groups – groups who are just trying to have a better life, into "criminals, illegal aliens, and terrorists." Unjust housing costs, incarceration, gentrification, and detention without trial are all causes of poverty, but they share a common root: It's okay to hurt "them" for our safety or comfort, because they never deserved life to begin with."

How do we counteract this disturbing trend? How do we connect with one another again and connect our own stories to the stories of God? Often it begins by simply showing up, by listening for where God is breaking in, and affirming what we see in one other. It's what happens each time we show up at the Food Bank, or the shelter, or at a home that needs rebuilt, or at a Homeland Security check-in with someone we didn't even know. It happens when we slow down and spend time sharing our stories. The morning that several of us went to the Southside to be with Carman for her Homeland Security check-in, I assumed she would be eager to get back on the road for her 3.5 hour return trip when she emerged from her check-in. But she wasn't. Through Nancy Heishman's good translation work, she told us about her children, and showed us pictures on her phone. We sang songs of joy and praise together and gave thanks in prayer for what God had done. We parted as new friends, and brothers and sisters in Christ. We connected with each other and connected our stories to the God who continues to work among us.

My prayer for all of us today is that we will all be attentive to where God is showing up all around us, bringing unexpected, prophetic joy. My prayer for us today is that even in the midst of our struggles we can sing, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come," and that every heart may indeed prepare him room. May it be so for each of us and all of us. And all God's people said, Amen.

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[i] Michael Bennett, Pastoral Perspective, Feasting on the Word, p.94