

Luke 1:39-56

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'

And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Our Source of Joy

Mary sounds like quite a revolutionary here, doesn't she? In this song that she sings (which is called the Magnificat) she's saying that God has "brought down the powerful...and lifted up the lowly; filled the hungry...and sent the rich away empty." You could say that she is advocating revolution here, but what's interesting is she's speaking not about what WILL happen but rather WHAT HAS ALREADY happened. God *has* brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly. God *has* filled the hungry and sent the rich away empty. That doesn't make sense when you consider that Mary was still living in a nation under foreign rule at a time when women were considered nothing more than a man's property. That doesn't make sense when she's living under authoritarian rule where those in power have little regard for the poor and the hungry, and such a system of government has been in place for many generations. How can Mary *rejoice* about what she says God has already done when the

reality seems to be that nothing has changed? How can a Christian *today* rejoice when circumstances seem to be no different than those that Mary lived under – okay, so women have more rights today than they did in Mary’s day, but when we look around us do we find that God has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly? Has he filled the hungry and send the rich away empty? It seems to me that the powerful seem to be holding onto their power quite successfully, and the rich are getting richer. Meanwhile the lowly and the hungry are hardly raised up. So what could Mary possibly be talking about? How can she rejoice about what God has done when it seems apparent that God hasn’t done much of anything to change the ways of the rich and the powerful?

If there is one word in Mary’s song that clues us into why she can feel so joyful about a change that she believes has already occurred, that word is SPIRIT.

“My *spirit*,” Mary says, “rejoices in God my Savior.” She may have been a woman living in an oppressive patriarchal culture, *but her spirit could rejoice*. She may have been a Palestinian peasant living under a brutal foreign dictatorship, *but her spirit could rejoice*. She may have been a peasant betrothed to a man whose trade could barely support her or her child, *but her spirit could rejoice*. She may have been in a predicament where the mere fact that she was pregnant without being officially married meant that the religious authorities could condemn her to death, *but her spirit could rejoice*.

I know that there are people here who have been down in the dumps by all *worldly* standards – they’ve been without money, without home, without any idea where their next meal was coming from, people who felt completely alone, *but their spirit could rejoice*. And the reason their spirit could rejoice was not because they were expecting that their circumstances were going to change that much – that they were going to stop being poor or homeless or hungry. The reason their spirit could rejoice was because *in their complete material poverty they were forced to put all their trust in God*. You see, as long as we have everything we need to physically survive, to be healthy and comfortable and know that our future is safe and sound, that our pension and 401K will allow us to live out our lives comfortably, we find no reason to **really** trust in God. And as long as we don’t find a need in God, we have no need to be spiritual at all. The problem is that a life lived without any intersection with the Spirit is a rather impoverished life. If we live our lives as one of the rich and powerful who always have everything that we need to survive, that tends to be all that we do – SURVIVE. We may survive quite well – we may eat well and dress well and drive nice cars and live in nice houses and travel to nice places. But in the end we are simply surviving. We may know some form of happiness, but do we know what true joy is?

I said that joy is spiritual, and spiritual means that it relates to God, and if it relates to God who is the creator of all things that means that joy comes from our relationship with God and with all things...with one another. We cannot find joy in isolation. We can’t find joy if all we do is tend to ourselves. We only find joy as we relate to God and to each other. And if our lives are spent focused on procuring what we need for our individual survival our lives are joyless. On the other hand, if our lives are spent focused on God and on our neighbors, if our lives are spent seeking God’s will and tending to the needs of others, we find true joy.

Mary knew true joy because the Spirit with within her. Christ was quite literally within her, but the Spirit of God had already transformed her heart so that she could declare that people like her, people who have God's Spirit dwelling in them, have been raised up while the powerful – who have tended to use their power to isolate themselves from others have been brought down from their thrones, and the rich who have too often refrained from using their wealth to benefit those who are hungry or homeless have been sent away empty because the powerful and the rich have never pursued the Spiritual which means they have never pursued God which means that their lives are really empty.

We can thank God that his Spirit speaks to some who rich and powerful, who use their wealth and power to benefit others, who don't see wealth and power as tools used to enhance their own physical well-being but use their money and influence to help those who have little. There are even those who renounce wealth and status to serve those in low places – I think of Saint Francis for one, a man from a wealthy noble family who devoted his life to serving the poor. We as Americans can thank God that his Spirit has spoken to us so that our power and wealth does not always blind us to the needs of others or prevented us from being kind and generous to the poor and the marginalized. I call that grace – when God shows us that the pursuit of personal power and wealth is a blind alley, that all the treasures we store up are vanity, as the author of Ecclesiastes noted.

Today we lit the third Advent candle, the joy candle, because Christ brings us joy. His life was spent in true joy (though he did suffer and die) but he knew the joy that comes from a life spent for others. In Jesus' case it was a life spent not just for *some* others but for all of mankind. We struggle to spend our lives for ALL others. We spend our lives for SOME others; we usually start with family and friends, then for neighbors and some others, AND THE GOOD NEWS IS that each act of kindness brings us some joy. God smiles upon all the good that we do, even if we restrict our goodness to those most familiar to us. That's why we love Christmas. Our giving may indeed be focused on our own family and friends, but the Spirit of God leads us beyond those boundaries, and we end up helping with Operation Christmas Child, or collecting knick knacks or buying clothes and toys for people we don't know and have no reason to care about other than the fact that God's Spirit tells us that they are loved, and we must love them as God loves them. It is God's will that the joy that we do experience will lead us to more acts of kindness to more and more people, that our "sphere of kindness" will grow, and with it our joy will grow, until the day finally comes when all walls will dismantled, all humanity embraces one another in love, and our joy will truly be complete. Advent is about the coming of that day.