

**“Leaping for Joy”**  
**Luke 1:46-55**  
**December 13, 2020**  
**Third Week in Advent**

And Mary said,

I’m bursting with God-news; my soul magnifies the Lord.  
I’m dancing the song of my Savior God.  
God took one good look at me, and look what happened—  
I’m the most fortunate woman on earth!  
What God has done for me will never be forgotten,  
the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.  
God’s mercy flows in wave after wave  
on those who are in awe before God.

God bared a divine arm and showed unmatched strength,  
scattered the bluffing braggarts.  
God knocked tyrants off their high horses,  
pulled victims out of the mud.  
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;  
the callous rich were left out in the cold.  
God embraced the chosen child, Israel;  
God remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.  
It’s exactly what God promised,  
beginning with Abraham and right up to now.

*Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.*

One of my favorite scenes from the show, “Mama Mia,” comes at the end. The relationships have all straightened out; Momma gets her man (in the movie this is

Meryl Streep and Pierce Brosnan); her daughter and her fiancé decide to wait to be married; the resort gets a much needed shot in the arm and will survive; and the town engages in a massive town party, full of food and drink, dancing, kissing and merry-making. It is a scene that screams the emotion, “Joy!”

You may be asking me why I chose to show “Mamma Mia” during Advent? Why not a good old-fashioned Christmas movie? Here’s the answer: as it gets colder and darker, as the virus keeps us more separated and lonely, I decided to go for a story of love lost and found again, of young people making foolish and then wise choices, of a man expected to be straight in a straight man’s profession finally allowing himself to live his authentic life, and of friends reliving their gloried past and celebrating their enduring friendship. I couldn’t think of a Christmas movie that does all that, but next week for you Christmas movie buffs, I am showing and telling “How the Grinch Stole Christmas,”

This week’s story told in “Mama Mia” is a musical that you either love or dislike. But it does bring to mind unbridled Joy and that’s the Advent theme this week.

I have a hard time believing the child, Mary, is all cranked up about being pregnant and unmarried, but Luke tells her story from a voice of extreme joy upon her knowing she is with child. So, if I am asking you to give “Mama Mia” a go, I can also go with Luke’s version of the nativity story. It’s only fair, Joy being what the world needs about now.

This passage in Luke is called, “The Canticle of Mary.” You might have heard it referred to as the “Magnificat.” A canticle is “a hymn, psalm or other Christian song of praise with lyrics taken from a biblical text.” (*Britannica Dictionary of the Bible*). Here’s what I find so compelling about it: Mary sings joyfully of her future and the future of all people, of circumstances she hopes will come to pass-“yet, they are written in declarative present and past tense, as though the events they describe have already

taken place,” giving her beautiful words the assurance of a faith presently-lived, a voice assuring us that God’s future plan is both “inevitable and perfected.” (Shaia, *Hearts and Minds*, 308). Thus, the prayer becomes the dream for the world realized in the birth, life, and resurrection of Jesus soon to come. Mary is rock-solid in her faith, though shaky on how it is about to play out in her simple life.

“My soul magnifies the Lord!” she proclaims. I think this means that as you think about her story, she defines it as fortune. If you look at her time and context, she exalts the God of Abraham and Moses and welcomes the change of scenery on the landscape of faith that will be her son, Jesus, who we already know and love as the Christ.

She is clairvoyant in this detail, and rock-steady in her role in bearing and bringing hope and peace into the world. Luke brings us this version of Mary and her song as a model from which the first century new believers can draw strength and resolve.

As Mary and Joseph’s story continues in Luke, they find no settled place to give birth and raise their child. They are forced to leave their home to take part in the Roman census far from Nazareth, all the way to Bethlehem. This is an order that smacks of both civil and religious oppression. Mary is near-term when the order comes; and they have to go; there is no dispensation allowed for pregnant women without means.

Luke’s nativity story is much more raw than we see in Matthew’s Gospel, where the baby Jesus is born under a bright star and attended to by adoring fans—the regal Magi come from afar to pay homage to the Christ child. In Luke, the setting is stripped down to a stable—not even a room in an inn out of the weather. In a stable with animals and wind and freezing temperatures, Mary gives birth in an animal feeding trough—a manger. The baby no doubt shivers his way through the night; this will be no

king as we think of the term with flowing robes and heavy down comforters. This king will be tended to by animals and weary parents without means.

Luke uses the stable birth as a metaphor for his readers, for by the time they are hearing this story, they, too, have been cast out of their original home and can find no room in the “inn” of their meager lives. That Luke casts Jesus’ raw birth as a joyful event is his challenge to the early believers—and I think to us as well, as Alexander John Shaia puts it—to “transcend bitterness and resentment. He asks [us] to see that [our] uncomfortable new circumstances are the perfect, powerful, and perhaps even *destined* way that the Christ can be born in [us].”

Remember last week we looked at the presence of angels in the story of Jesus’ birth. They appear in Luke’s narrative as well, coming to the shepherds to rejoice with them in the new thing God has created in the world. Shepherds were not the cute and cuddly figures we see in our nativity sets; they were outcasts, living in isolation without many resources or family. They lived on the brink of starvation and they were widely accused of thievery. Shaia likens them to modern-day homeless people. This is so perfect an image to usher in the age of Jesus! The angels rejoice with those who most need a Messiah, singing songs to the glory of God and honoring Mary for her sacrifice and service. In Luke’s gospel, Mary’s heart is overcome with joy, but with the birth of her child she remains silent, holding all her feelings “in her heart.”

By the time Luke writes his Gospel near the end of the first century, his people—the people of the Christus movement-- have been displaced from their spiritual home in Jerusalem. He assures them that Jesus was born for them and in them. In Mary’s Magnificat song of joy, he invites us to be one with the first Christians, “to be curious about the place in which they [and we] now [are found] —this rough home on the road—and to rejoice in the blessings, knowing that the future is bright.”

Can you believe this prediction? Do you think the future is bright? That's a tall order in these days. And the question goes so far beyond which of the many vaccines will be our salvation against the novel coronavirus, beyond an election, beyond a season of one winter's desolation. As for Luke's people, as for Mary, who held her feelings close to her heart, this question is less about what happens outside in the world and more about what we hold in *our* hearts, what the Christmas story means for our lives, and for how we approach this gift of Jesus's birth.

This Advent and this Christmas, let us find joy in simple things. This will not be the big splash year with tons of family, kids and cousins running around like wild banshees, huge dinners and bundling up and trudging out through the snow and cold to church in the small country church. We will be quieter, our celebrations will be smaller, and our church will sit curiously empty, wondering where all her people have gone.

We will gather online and we will make the best of it, hopeful for next year, hopeful for science and faith to catch up to each other, hopeful to again sing our canticles in the sanctuary filled with people and "Silent Night" candles.

This year, our joy will be more muted. We will hold the enormity of our circumstances in our hearts. We will grieve our departed family and friends, we will pray and pledge to keep ourselves virus-free, and we will hold private conversations with God. Our joy will be less visible, perhaps, but it may be richer than in easy years past, it may run deeper than our addiction to Christmas commercialism, and it may sustain us longer than one evening and one day.

Who knows? Mary's predictions may come true that, in the NRSV translation of her canticle:

[God] 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 [high places],  
and lifted up the lowly;  
[God] has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

Mama Mia—it's an Advent to remember and a peaceful Christmas joy to behold.

*May It Be So.*

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