

Sermon, December 19, 2021

Luke 1:39-56

“Blessed Mary”

Today we have lit the candle of joy, rounding out the Advent season. We might ask, what are we joyful for, and more basically, what is meant by the word joy? Perhaps, not as easy as we might think. C S Lewis, author of numerous books, including one entitled, ‘Surprised by Joy’, wrote that joy, “must be sharply distinguished both from Happiness and Pleasure. Joy...has indeed one characteristic, and one only, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again...I doubt that anyone who has tasted it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world. But then joy is never in our power and pleasure often is.”

This statement doesn’t really define what joy is but speaks of the rapturous experience that it is. And maybe that’s the point, that it is not something that can be defined, but only experienced. A rare and special experience that deeply touches both heart and soul.

Lewis also said that “Joy is distinct not only from pleasure in general but even from aesthetic pleasure. It must have the stab, the pang, the inconsolable yearning.” This would suggest that the experience of joy can happen even when we are devoid of feelings of happiness or pleasure. It reminds me of an experience that I once had in a very dark and painful time in my life, when in the midst of a mournful and pleading prayer, I suddenly felt transported to an experience I had never had before. The best way I can explain it is that the pain and sadness were still there yet seemed to be floating on a cloud that was peaceful and calm.

Note, as well, that Lewis uses the phrase “inconsolable yearning”. It was in large part that that experience which led Lewis from being an atheist to becoming a committed Christian. I can also say that my own experience had a powerful influence on the direction my own life would take. I can’t speak for Lewis, but I think we both had an “inconsolable yearning” within ourselves, that we may not have even had an awareness of. What might that yearning have been? I would suggest a need for a relationship with God. It was not long after my experience that I opened my heart to Jesus Christ.

In this morning’s reading Mary, while pregnant with child, travels to visit Elizabeth, who was also with child, and upon hearing Mary’s greeting the baby in Elizabeth’s womb leapt for joy. That baby, of course, would become known as John the Baptist. What does that symbolize? Not simply the happiness of one baby in the presence of another, but that the child Mary was bearing was the answer to their people’s “inconsolable yearning”, i.e., the coming of a Messiah. Even at a time when their people were suffering under Roman tyranny this yet unborn child embodied hope. The yet unborn Baptist recognized this. Later, once the adult Jesus began his ministry, John cries out, “For this reason, my joy has been fulfilled.”

In the 15th chapter of John, Jesus says, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” He’s not just saying be joyful, but that when we are true to the things, he taught we find his joy within us. Again, an invitation to open our hearts unto him, and recognize that joy in its truest sense flows from the bottomless well of God’s love.

In an encyclical entitled, *Evangelii Gaudium*, that is, 'The Joy of the Gospel', Pope Francis writes "...joy is not expressed the same way at all times in life, especially at moments of great difficulty. Joy adapts and changes, but it always endures, even as a flicker of light born of our personal certainty that, when everything is said and done, we are infinitely loved. I understand the grief of people who have to endure great suffering, yet slowly but surely we all have to let the joy of faith revive as a quiet yet firm trust, even amid the greatest distress." Francis affirms that joy exists, even in hard times, and that which it flows from is God's love.

In that part of our reading called the Magnificat, Mary, who, in the 'Divine Comedy', Dante referred to as the Empress of All Joy, says, "His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation." As I have stated before, to fear him essentially means to hold God in awe, and, again, our awe should arise out of our recognition of how much we are loved whether we are deserving of that love, or not. To quote Francis again, "God never tires of forgiving us...". Just as the ancient Israelites yearned for a Messiah to lead them out of bondage, so we find joy in the fact that we have a Messiah who frees us from the bondage of sin and death.

Today is one of the few days that our sister Mary comes to our attention, as she is often overlooked in Protestant churches, but to me in seeing her acceptance of the angel's proclamation, her unending devotion to her Son even to the point of standing at the foot of his cross, and her ongoing presence at the birth of the church and beyond, makes her a figure who embodies all of the Advent virtues - hope, peace, love and joy. May we all find the faith to follow in her footsteps. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord as we come to the end of the Advent season and await our celebration of the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, may we find room in our hearts to embrace and embody the virtues of hope, peace, love and joy. May the spirit of Jesus dwell within us, that we too might relate to the world as he did - bearing witness to your divine love, reaching out to heal a broken world.

We offer our profoundest gratitude for the mercies you bestow, even knowing that there are times when we are undeserving of the forgiveness that you are so quick to give. With that in mind may we also find it within ourselves to be as forgiving to those who have hurt us in thought, word, and deed. Help us to be as compassionate as your Son and open our eyes that we may see the face of Christ in those we meet, especially those who suffer.

When we falter in our faith, Lord, may we look to those such as our sister Mary, John the Baptist, and Jesus' faithful disciples, as examples of what it means to be obedient to your will.

At this holy time of the year, we ask for your blessing upon your church here and throughout the world. May we truly be a force for good in the world, advocates for justice and peace.

And we especially ask for your blessing on those who live in poverty, those desperately in need of food and clean water, those who live in places ravaged by violence and the horrors of war, those displaced and in need of shelter, and, as always, those who are sick in body, mind and spirit, and may those who are soon to die find rest in your loving arms. Amen.