

**Make Room for Expectation: Joy**  
**Advent 3**  
**Isaiah 40:1-5; Luke 1:46-55**  
**12.16.18**



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**Reflection Questions for Personal Use or in a Group Context...** (please consider the teaching notes prior to consideration of the reflection questions)

**Response:** Write a prayer below that might represent a cry of the heart, a prayer of surrender, or a praise that God has ready given you.

**Take a Step:** Make time this week to come before God, continuing to bring this same prayer to him in hopeful expectation. Read Isaiah 40:1-5. Make a list of gratitude for his work in your life. Spend time in worship for the ways that God has shown himself faithful. Spend time offering hopeful prayers of supplication as well as time listening for his answers.

*“How would you describe the difference between happiness and joy? What are some of the qualities you have seen in others whom you consider to be joyful?”*

*“How do you think gratitude and surrender factor in to our joy-quotient?”*

*“How might questioning God be an act of defiance? How might it simply be an appeal for clarity? Is there a situation in which you might be able to admit to God that you don’t understand and ask him for clarity?”*

*“Is it possible that the joy that God longs to give you can be found in the context of the life that you are currently experiencing? Where might you be able to find joy in your life where you never thought of looking?”*

*“What do you feel needs to change before your, ‘Yes’? How might your ‘yes’ embolden and transform you, right in the midst of all that remains uncertain and seemingly unaffected? What if the uncertainty is the only sure place of joy?”*

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## Teaching Notes...

**In Advent, you “declare” a lot of things--- about life, about God--- which are forged in anticipation and hope, even if not evidenced in your present experience. Everything you find yourself doing or declaring is “in spite of” what you see or what you don’t see. It’s birthed out of faith.**

This portion of Luke is referred to as the “**Magnificat**” (from the Latin for “*magnify*”). It is a ‘canticle’— a song inspired by a biblical text. It’s not a doctrinal statement or explanation, but an imaginative response to a series of God-encounters which were challenging her to see the world (her world) not only as it “is”, but as it “will be” (can be). It’s a gritty poem that holds together adversity and hope. “*Comfort and joy*”.

Songs give us permission to dream out loud; to speak about things we usually only allow our hearts to consider. You can get away with saying a lot of stuff by singing it. For some reason, if it’s rhythmic and musical, it can be un-edited.

God intends to draw Mary into what he is doing. This is obviously the kind of stuff you are ‘drawn into’ because it’s anything but ‘safe’. You don’t walk into ‘assured’, but ‘confused and disturbed’; not with ‘clarity’, but ‘humility and faith’.

“...*you are highly favored...*” (*the recipient of God’s grace*). The angel doesn’t begin with our choosing God, but God choosing us! It confers worth upon us and affirms that our place in His Story--- in his world.

### **Joy is, perhaps, Advent’s best gift to us.**

There are any number of Hebrew and Greek words used to express the concept, but in its most elementary form, “**joy**” is: *to be glad, to be well, to thrive, to flourish*

While joy is certainly inclusive of happiness, it is simply more robust. It is not as ‘fickle’ or ‘fragile’ as happiness.

Metaphorically, joy “*comes in the a.m.*” It’s something that dawns after long hours darkness and weeping [Psalm 30:5; 126:5-6].

Joy is offered as a posture we assume because it’s rarely our default response [assessment: ‘*count it all joy...*’, James 5] Joy is often found in the last place(s) you would think to look [“*when you find yourself in adversity*”, James] Joy and adversity are often offered as companion responses.

Before Mary even gets ‘warmed up’, vocally, one thing becomes apparent: **this girl knows her story; she’s aware of her origins.**

Mary, here, is not offering us some spontaneous lyrics, but a song which rehearsed a story which had been inspiring song-writers, prophets and poets for some time. She reconstructs Hannah's prayer (1 Samuel 2) from some 1,000 years prior and makes it her own. She rehearses it, not merely as some historic event, but as part of an unfolding story of which she is an integral part.

**Joy is closely connected to all that we are willing to endure in order to experience the realization of that for which we are hoping.**

You can endure a lot in your life **IF** you believe that what's happening presently **won't last forever** and somehow **doesn't compare with what you will experience beyond it**.

It doesn't matter how much you can tolerate or what your pain threshold, *if you don't believe that God is good, your endurance will result, not in joy, but in resentment and bitterness* [Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17].

That means that joy demands a narrative--- a messianic (rescue) story to guide and frame your perspective which makes hope a reasonable response. Joy only matters if the story includes the anticipation of a time that signals the end of something and the beginning of something better.

*"Without the backstory, what are we to make of all of these visions of the world and all of the talk regarding sin and Saviors?"*

**The only true, biblical context for joy is amidst all that opposes it. It is out of the raw materials of our present situation that God creates the opportunities for joy.**

Mary wasn't singing about a time when, one day, she might finally have cause for joy. She was singing for joy!

She was rehearsing all of the pain and disillusionment of her past. She was rejoicing in how God had 'take notice' of her there. How God had actually visited her there... made her aware of his presence in the challenging circumstance.

It says that you don't have to 'be' anyone else or be 'anywhere' else to experience joy. You can be 'here', where that is for you, presently.

**Joy doesn't alter our life-circumstances, it simply 're-interprets' them.**

Christian joy is a profound decision for hope in the midst of all that causes us pain. It doesn't force us to generate some *"Christmas Cheer"* or *"holiday spirit"*.

Joy doesn't require you to deny/ignore the nature of your present, painful circumstances, nor does it demand that you suppress your sorrow. That's disingenuous and unhealthy.

I'm not sure you can speak about joy, with any authority or credibility, unless you have experienced pain. Everyone in the biblical narrative that writes about being joyful has had every reason not to be. In fact, they have every right to be bitter and resentful. You have that right, as well.

If you find joy "in" pain, there is a very real clinical diagnosis for that, but if you are able to find joy "in the pain", you might be closer to the hope and wholeness of the Advent response than you assumed.

## **(2) appropriate Advent responses:**

**"How can this be?"** That was not a cynical dismissal, but simply a desire for clarity. Mary admits she doesn't understand, but that's never stopped God before!

The question reverberates in our lives in a thousand different ways and in a myriad of conflicting circumstances. It reminds us not only of the simplicity of faith, but the demands of faith: a willingness to admit how much of the Story still remains unavailable to us.

**"May everything you have said about me come true".** Nobody says something like that without a settled confidence in the goodness of the other's intent, and only when they are confident in the capacity of the other to successfully implement their desires.

Surrender, not as simply "giving into" (conceding) insurmountable circumstances, but a "giving over" to the desires/will of another.

It will be at those times that God must not **"over-power"** us, but **"overshadow"** us [‘overshadow’- the ‘God-shade’ created in our lives as he hovers over us]. He must cast a bigger shadow; establish a bigger presence which might evoke from us the Advent response, **"Be it to me as you have said"**.

## **Mary does something totally irrational. She says "yes".**

Words that changed everything. She's not afraid to admit that she doesn't understand, but she refuses to allow the limitations of her understanding to prevent her from experiencing the favor (grace; movement) of God in her life. Mary's, "yes", broadened not only the possibilities for her life but her potential to bless others.

## **Even as her song was ending, somehow everything had changed, but not much had changed.**

Even as the soft glow was dissipating from the **8 lb., 6 oz. newborn, infant Jesus**, he looked pretty much like every other little Jewish boy.

There are (2) voices in the story: 1) God's, 2) ours. We need to hear both. The human voice keeps our faith grounded in the earthiness of our existence and experience. The Divine voice keeps our lives from being limited to or by the former.

It's not knowing "**what**" or "**when**" that keeps us attentive. The loss of one sense (sight) hones our other senses (hearing): all that we 'see'; all that we 'hear' when we can't see.