

### Sermon Advent Week 3 “Joy!” December 17, 2017

Worship Leader 1: The angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, a descendant of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, the angel said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was greatly perplexed at what the angel said, and kept carefully considering what kind of greeting this was.

**Everyone: The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God...”**

Worship Leader 2: Listen carefully: you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Israel forever, and of God's kingdom there shall be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin and have no intimacy with any man?”

**Everyone: Then the angel replied to Mary: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, and for that reason this holy Child shall be called the Son of God...”**

Worship Leader 1: And listen, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. For with God nothing is or ever shall be impossible.” Then Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.” And the angel left her.

Worship Leader 2: And Mary sang, “My soul magnifies and exalts the Lord, And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior. For God has looked with loving care on the humble state of this servant; For behold, from now on all generations will count me blessed and favored by God! For the Lord who is mighty has done great things for me; And holy is God's name. And God's mercy is upon generation after generation Toward those who stand in great awe of God. The Lord has done mighty deeds with God's powerful arm; God has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart. God has brought down rulers from their thrones, And exalted those who were humble. God has filled the hungry with good things; And sent the rich away empty-handed. The Lord has helped God's servant Israel, In remembrance of God's mercy, Just as God promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” Luke 1: 38, 46-55

This is the third Sunday of Advent, this sacred season of waiting for the coming of Jesus... to be born again in the manger in Bethlehem, born into this broken world, and born again into our hearts. Every Sunday in Advent we light another candle and hear the themes of this holy season. The first Sunday was hope, and last Sunday was peace, and today is joy. Mary is our model ~ the one whom the Orthodox church calls “Theotokos,” or “God-bearer”. Mary was surprised by joy... God surprised her with joy.

It might not seem so unbelievable that Mary conceived Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, or that He came into the world to seek and save sinners, but it can be harder to believe that Jesus came to be born in you, to live with you, and find a home in you. Mary shows us acceptance - and joy - for Jesus to be born in us so that God's promises will be fulfilled... for us to help birth God's Kingdom of justice, of hope, and peace, and joy.

Mary was ordinary, just a teenage girl, visited by an angel who told her that she had a part in God's plan to fulfill God's promises to the world. You are also a part of God's plan to fulfill God's promises to heal and transform the world. You have a choice, just as Mary did, to accept and warm to this idea, or to resist it and mistrust that God has chosen you, like God chose Mary, to be part of God's plan. It's important to us that Mary was ordinary... so ordinary that we don't know anything about her... nothing about her beauty or her wit or her intelligence... we only know that she was present to God, and that she was sensitive to the things of the Spirit. God also cares about your receptivity to the things of the Spirit, and your willingness to be used by God. It was a bold and risky plan of God's, to become one of us, and to be born in us. And if we're going to be used by God we've got to have God's audacity and adventurousness. We've got to allow Jesus be born in us, to make our hearts and minds His home, to allow Him to shape our wills, and for His love to fill us. We've got to boldly surrender to His coming, like Mary did.

That Jesus wants to be born in us, and make His home in us is good news for those of us who feels that we're not very special; or who wonder if our life matters; or who want to make a difference in the world. In other words, it's good news for all of us.

During sacred seasons like Advent (the church calls them the “extraordinary” seasons) the harsh lines between sacred and secular are softer, and human hearts are more yielding, and it can seem possible that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and that He’s still being born for us, and in us. During sacred seasons we are more able to hear with the ears of our hearts; more able to sense God’s nearness. During sacred seasons, if we observe them (if we pay attention) we tend to be open to mystery and wonder and joy. It doesn’t have to be in a sacred season that we surrender to God. Sometimes what alerts us to the things of the Spirit is a horrible diagnosis, or the bottom of a bottle, or a shattered dream... and we surrender our plans, and open ourselves to God’s plan for Jesus to be formed in us, as He was in Mary.

Mary was surprised by what the angel told her, but I think not by the angel’s presence. Mary and Joseph seem to have been chosen by God because of their familiarity with the things of the Spirit. Joseph, we heard last week, was a righteous man - he was right with God, which means he looked for listened to God. Mary and Joseph are models for us of how to live sacred lives in a seemingly godless world. Because of their awareness of God they were able to surrender to the surprising and unwelcome news that they would be parents before they’d consummated their marriage. Parenthood was being thrust upon them. Life has a way of thrusting unwelcome (and even frightening and horrible) circumstances on us. That’s why Joseph and Mary are so important to us as models and teachers of surrender and of joy.

Mary burst into song when the when the angel Gabriel left her. She understood this news, that she was to birth the Messiah and set God’s plan in motion, God’s audacious plan to share our human life, to be an honor and an adventure. In that

moment Mary saw herself as God's partner in healing and redeeming the world. Mary wasn't the healer or the redeemer... that is Jesus... but she was God's partner.

Historically Methodists have a reputation as the "social justice" Protestants. Methodists understand that we are partners with God in building God's Kingdom, and healing and redeeming the world. But we sometimes neglect the things of the Spirit, sometimes overlook what John Wesley called "piety". Piety is the means of grace - practicing the presence of God - spending time, as Joseph and Mary did, familiarizing ourselves with God... looking for God and listening to God, and immersing ourselves in God's love. Piety is a surrender to God's will and to God's healing and redeeming love for us. This holy season of Advent reminds us of our need to practice piety; an invitation for us to look more closely and listen more deeply to the things of the Spirit. Mary is our model of piety, of a life intertwined with God's. Mary was perhaps the ideal Methodist; a contemplative and an activist; spiritually alive and socially active.

She is sometimes referred to as a nobody: young, uneducated, poor, unsophisticated. I wonder if that's why Mary was able to sing this amazing song of hope and joy. There was room in Mary (because she had so little) there was room in Mary for Jesus to develop from a couple of cells into a human being. Mary recognized that God was using her to do a new thing in the world, and she was filled with joy at being part of it. Mary saw God's liberation for all people in this seemingly small act of birthing God's Son, God's Presence, into the world. As she sang, Mary became a prophet, who saw and testified to what God would do. She sang with confidence, seeing that God's plan had already been fulfilled. "God has scattered those who were proud... God has brought

down rules from their thrones... exalted those who were humble. God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty-handed.”

God is always doing a new thing for us, and in us, and with us. God is always doing the work of healing and redeeming the world. In this sacred season of Advent is an invitation to us to not lose heart, that in spite of the evil and injustice, the hatred and intolerance, the seeming godlessness - in the world and in ourselves - Jesus is coming with healing and redemption for all creation. Jesus is being born again in us and into this world.

When the angel told Mary that she would conceive and give birth to a Holy Child, God's Son, when Mary was still a virgin, she asked, “How can this be?” You might be asking yourself that question as well, about Jesus being born in you, and finding His home in you. “How can this be, when I'm a sinner, or a half-hearted Christian, or I only believe in God sometimes?” This is the answer the angel gave to Mary. It wasn't given to Mary as a sign of an easy life or that she would get what she wanted. It was God's promise to be present with Mary, and to use Mary as an agent of love and healing in the world. The angel said, “With God nothing is or ever shall be impossible”. I believe this is God's promise to you, and to me, this day, and always. We are to be like Mary was, “Theotokos” ~ God-bearers... bearing God's love and light, God's hope, and peace, and joy in the world... because as the angel said, “Nothing is or ever shall be impossible with God”. Amen.