



PREPARE THE WAY FOR JOY

Isaiah 12:2-6; Luke 1:26-38

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There are moments in life that stand out from all the rest: the first time you left home for college; the day you shipped out to serve overseas; the first time your heart skipped a beat at the sight of the one you love; the time you held vigil beside the bed of a dying parent; the day of your child's birth. All these moments have significance because they contain within themselves something of the joy and pain, the hopes and dreams of human life. They also have significance because they link us to something beyond ourselves, something universal, something holy. Such moments can come in profound silence or in loud clamor. They stand out because they disrupt the normal flow of daily living and the relentless ticking of the clock.

Mary had such a moment. Mary, a young girl in a small town in Galilee, is promised in marriage to a man named Joseph. Can you picture Mary sitting in her parents' house? Her morning chores are done; the fire is set in the hearth; the water is drawn, and the bread dough is left to rise. As she sits at the loom to weave, Mary daydreams about her future with Joseph. She imagines what it will be like to be the mistress of her own home.

Suddenly, the room is filled with bright light, moving air, and an overpowering presence. A messenger disrupts her peaceful thoughts and simple plans. When the angel Gabriel speaks to her, she is troubled and filled with fear. The angel speaks, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." She suddenly finds her life turned upside down. From that moment on, her life is never the same. When Gabriel speaks to Mary, a quiet, ordinary afternoon is changed into an eternal moment; a simple house becomes a holy sanctuary. God's disruptions may scare us to death before they fill us with joy. God's joy cracks open the ordinary moments of our lives. The poet Rumi wrote:

*God's joy moves from unmarked box to unmarked box,
from cell to cell. As rainwater, down into flowerbed.
As roses, up from ground.
Now it looks like a plate of rice and fish,
now a cliff covered with vines,
now a horse being saddled.
It hides within these,
till one day it cracks them open.*

It is hard to discover joy when we think we have the weight of the world on our shoulders. It is hard to hear God speak when we are doing all the talking. It is hard to be open to God's disruptions when we have dressed ourselves in protective armor and clever defenses. We stay in the middle of the crowd because those who dare to stand out from the crowd, at best get laughed at and, at worst, get crucified. Therefore, we often lead safe, dreary, and unsatisfying lives. All the while, God has something to say to us. God's joy hides and waits to crack us open. When joy cracks us open, God becomes more than just a word in our vocabulary. Faith becomes more than just a positive attitude. That's the way it is.

Joy is about discernment. It comes when we can pause long enough to detect the ways of God in the comings and goings, the hills and valleys, of our lives. When we discern the engendering Spirit of God, then the ordinary places of our lives become holy sanctuaries and even the painful moments can be filled with joy. One of the reasons that the carols of Christmas live all year in our hearts is because they express the deep joy that comes to earth despite all the violence and evil that plague the world.

Joy is quite different from happiness. Happiness depends upon the outward circumstances of life: health, friendship, reputation, meaningful work, sufficient wealth. Joy is a divine gift that can come to us in the most troubling and uncertain moments of life. Joy connects us to that which is eternal, timeless, and everlasting. Joy connects us to God. To discover divine joy at the bottom of all things may not come suddenly or easily. We may need time to sift through our experiences, to comprehend our pain, and to recognize our blessings. As the psalmist says, "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (Psalm 30:5).

Some years ago, the Rev. William Sloan Coffin wrote about the experience of visiting a prisoner of war in Iran at Christmastime. In the bleakness of that prison, the American prisoner, Moorhead Kennedy, understood that Jesus was born into a bleak, inhumane, and inhospitable world. Yet neither the harsh prison nor the bleakness of a Bethlehem stable could destroy the joy of God's gift to the world. Coffin writes, "it is in the depths of hell that heaven is found affirmed; that Christmas indeed is a rose *in winter*; and that the joy that comes from God more easily united with pain than with anything else...Joy is that which survives when your worst fears have been realized. Joy is that which still burns brightly when the sorrows of the world sweep over you like the sea." ("Joy to the World," published in *House and Garden*.)

When Mary understands what the angel is saying to her, she too finds joy in obedience to the plan of God. In spite of all the difficulties, obstacles, and anguish that lie before her, Mary accepts and embraces what God is doing through her. Embracing joy, she says, "Let it be unto me according to your word." When we are struggling with a problem, dealing with a broken relationship, trying to lift ourselves from the "valley of the shadow of death", or even called into a new venture, what would it be to say with Mary, "Let it be unto me according to your word"? What would it be in those moments to find that deep joy?

Some years ago, during the Christmas season, I was in the emergency room with the family of a man in the congregation who had suffered a severe heart attack. In another corner of the room, an elderly woman with grey flyaway hair was wrapped up in a coat twice her size. Sitting in a wheelchair, she kept screaming to anyone who would hear, "Help me. Won't somebody take me home." Beside her stood a woman who may have been her daughter. In vain, she tried to comfort the older woman. At the front desk stood a teenager and a man. They could have been a father and son waiting to get the bad cut on the boy's face stitched up except for the fact that the boy was in handcuffs and the man wore a police uniform. All the while Christmas music was playing over the speakers: "Joy to the World, the Lord is Come..." There was nothing joyful about that night. It struck me just how out of tune with the lives of so many people the songs of Christmas seem to be.

The English poet, William Wordsworth, had a special appreciation for nature. He found in nature a powerful beauty, a life force, and a universal harmony. He found in nature a deep joy that sustained his life. In one poem, he is revisiting after a five-year absence a wild and craggy spot by the banks of a river. His memory of the beauty of the place sustained him and compelled him to share his joy. He wrote, "With an eye made quiet by the power of harmony, and the deep power of joy, we see into the life of things." (*Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*). Through the joy in Mary's heart, we see into the life of things.

One of my favorite Christmas decorations is a small angel with his mouth wide open in song. It looks more like a choirboy than the angel Gabriel. I imagine him singing an eternal joyful song of praise to God for what God has done to redeem the world. He sings no matter what the weather, what the news, or what mood we're in. He sings for all of us and even for those who cannot sing. I imagine he sings for the woman with the fly-away hair, for the boy in handcuffs, for folks in trouble, for friends who are sick, for powerless and abused women, for the children in refugee camps, and for you and me. Maybe this year Bunny and I will not pack our angel away but leave him up all year round to remind us of the joy and peace Mary found in the promise of God.

In every human life there are moments that stand out from all the rest: our schedules get disrupted, our relationships become strained, our plans fall apart, devastating things occur. When we look beneath the surface of our experiences and listen for the voice of God, we may discover even in the most difficult times a divine joy to keep us, to lead us, and to sustain us from now on and forever more.