

**“The Opposite of Joy”**  
**Advent III**  
**Gordon Wiersma 12/13/09**

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson – Luke 1:46-55

\* the beginning of Luke tells of the appearance of angel Gabriel to Mary, with the shocking news that she will have a child through the Holy Spirit, a child who will be the promised savior from God

\* parallel to Mary’s story is the story of Elizabeth, as she and her husband Zechariah after many years of disappointment conceive their first child; Elizabeth is a cousin to Mary – and Elizabeth’s son is John the Baptist who will prepare the way for Mary’s son Jesus

\* pregnant Mary visits pregnant Elizabeth, and a whole lot of blessing and joy happens – and Mary sings a song that has come to be known as the Magnificat: ‘my soul magnifies the Lord’

- I am going to read it – then our musicians will sing and play it – then I will reflect on it for a bit.

from Luke 1:

<sup>46</sup>And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup>for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God’s servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God’s name. <sup>50</sup>God’s mercy is for those who worship God with awe from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup>God has shown strength with his arm; the Lord has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup>God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup> God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. <sup>54</sup>God has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of God’s mercy, <sup>55</sup>according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

What is the opposite of joy? If you asked a bunch of people that – if you asked yourself that – what do you think you would come up with for an answer? In my own unscientific poll of myself, it seemed to me that what would usually come to mind first as the opposite of joy is something such as sadness – sorrow – that’s what the opposite of joy is: to be unhappy, dour, disconsolate, despondent, melancholic, if you want to start using the Thesaurus. The opposite of joy is sadness – does that sound right to you?

What if you asked these texts that we heard from Scripture today - what’s the opposite of joy? What do you think these passages would come up with for an answer? Well, joy is a part of all of the passages we heard today –

joy mentioned in each one - but when joy is set in contrast, when joy's opposite is identified, sorrow is not what you hear about. What you hear instead as the contrast to joy is fear...

\* Isaiah 12 was a text for today, we said it in the opening litany – it says ‘I will trust in God and not be afraid’ – and then it speaks of having joy like water from a well...not fear, joy

\* The prophet Zephaniah talks to the people of God about rejoicing, and as he does so, he says ‘do not fear!’ ‘Don’t be afraid’ in the midst of the challenge you face - rejoice

\* Paul writes to the church in Philippi: ‘rejoice ALWAYS’, which he then puts together with ‘do not worry’ – worry, one of the faces of fear; do not worry, rejoice – ALWAYS!

\* Mary gives voice to the Magnificat – a song bursting with intense joy; and I think that the song of Mary can be seen as the bookend to how her story begins: a few chapters earlier when the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary and tells this unmarried young woman she will be with child - what is one of the first things Gabriel says to her? ‘Don’t be afraid’ - and it’s when we finally hear Mary’s song that Gabriel’s words echo: Mary is not afraid – she rejoices.

The opposite of joy? The answer pointed to in the Word today is that the opposite of joy is fear – not so much sorrow or sadness, but fear. What do you think about that? What do you make of that? I don’t mean it just to be a word game with an interesting alternative opposite to consider – I think what that consistent contrast of joy and fear that we hear in Scripture today offers us is a deeper understanding of what both of those things are, and of how both of those substances of fear and joy are at work in our lives and in our world, and in our faith.

And it seems to me that the clearest way to express that, is that it is about a matter of control – that where joy and fear come up against each other is at the core of what directs you, controls you, decides your path. In recent years it’s become more and more evident to me what an immensely powerful force fear is – in our world, in my heart, in yours; in religion, in politics; among nations, in relationships – individual, corporate, internal, external – fear isn’t just a feeling, it is a spiritual force with the power to control, and it is a brutal master. Fear makes the world into a place of scarcity, of isolation, of judgment, of power over, either/or; fear controls how we see each other and ourselves, our God and our world. Fear reigns and it does not give up its grip willingly or easily.

Joy is not just a feeling either – while there are many rich and important things we can contrast with the power of fear – hope, peace, love,

the vocabulary of faith – it’s a powerful thing to give joy its due as more than just a happy feeling – to realize that joy has the power to control us as well, in the gracious grip that comes from our souls finding their true home. Although this contrast is probably a bit too simplistic, one way to understand joy is to realize that while happiness is a feeling that depends on a particular circumstance, joy instead is a power we bring to any circumstance. Joy is not something we manufacture, it is a gift, a fruit of God’s Spirit that holds us. Last week in Early Worship, Tom Boogaart told of a time when he expressed the essence of his Christian faith to a friend with this simple truth: “I am not alone” – that’s what joy is – the reality that in any circumstance we are not alone but belong to God – and that joy directs us to see each other, ourselves, our God and world in life-giving ways – ways of abundance, of connection, of grace, of power with, of both/and.

It’s how we start to understand that joy isn’t the opposite of sorrow, rather joy is found even in our grief because God is with us even there; it’s how we start to see that joy isn’t just an unmarried pregnant woman singing a song to make herself feel better – it is Mary who knows God to be at work in and present in her life - and so that means God present in and at work in her world - and that means God is bringing up the lowly and filling the hungry and God’s promises are sure – and that is true joy: the joy that comes from knowing yourself not alone, but a child of God; the joy that sends us into a world of fear that all people may know that truth at their core. “Do not be afraid” - the joy that with Mary rejoices in God our Savior, who takes away the fear of the world. AMEN.