

“The Power of Joy”

Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-5 and Luke 1:39-56

Rev. Lewis Galloway

December 14, 2025



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

One 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 one corner of the room, an elderly woman with grey flyaway hair was wrapped up in a coat twice her size. From her wheelchair, she screamed to anyone who would hear, “Help me. Won’t somebody take me home.” 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: “O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.” There was nothing still about the city that night. It struck me just how out of tune the songs of Christmas seem to be with the world and the lives of so many people.

“Joy to the World” strikes the wrong note with wars raging in Ukraine, Sudan, Gaza and too many other places, with children and refugees on the verge of starvation, and with violence shootings on a college campus and in a synagogue. “Silent Night, Holy Night” sounds off key when nights are filled with anxious worry for those who wake in pain from cancer, when children wake in fear hearing parents shouting in the other room, or when people lie awake in a shelter because they have no job and no home. Yet, in the most difficult times, the music and poetry of Christmas awaken in us the deep power of joy.

The most joyful song in all of Scripture is found in these words of Mary. Is it also a song of praise to God that seems out of tune with the times in which we live?

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Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth is pregnant with the baby who will become John the Baptist. The Holy Spirit opens the mind and heart of Elizabeth to recognize the gift that God is giving to the world through the baby to be born to Mary. Mary responds to Elizabeth's greeting with the words we know as the Magnificat:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior... God has shown strength with his arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty (Luke 1:46-53).

Mary's song praises God for the mighty things that God is doing through her.

God's greatness will be revealed in the birth of a tiny child. This child will determine the destiny of all peoples and all nations. Fulfilling the words of the prophet Isaiah, her song proclaims how God is bringing comfort to a troubled world. Jesus will embody the glory of God. He will lift up the valleys of despair and bring down the mountains of pride. He will put down the mighty from their thrones and send the rich away empty-handed.

Her song is fulfilled when we see how Jesus healed the sick, ate with sinners, exposed the poverty of the rich, fed the hungry, stood against the powerful, faced death with faith and courage, and promised to return to bring peace and justice to the earth. Through this child, the world will see that the mighty power of God is revealed as mercy.

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If you joined us in worship this morning not quite sure that you were in the mood for Christmas, if you came weighed down by your burdens, if you came concerned about how you are going to support your family, if you came with a heavy heart about your life or your future, if you came with heart full of anxiety about someone you love, then the song of Mary for you.

We cannot imagine that it was easy for Mary to sing this song. It is time to take Mary off the front of a glossy Christmas card and see her as the timid, inexperienced young girl she was. She lived in the same kind of world in which we live: a world in which people are suspicious of new things, a world in which humble people get crushed and influential people misuse their power, a world in which children are abused and hungry, a world in which immigrants cannot find a safe home, a world in which people do not listen to the voices of women speaking disturbing truths, a world in which older people struggle to make ends meet, and a world in which evil seems to have an enormous capacity to devour goodness. Should I say more?

The joyful songs of Christmas are always out of tune with the times in which we live. Maybe, this is the way it should be. The songs of Christmas take their cue not from the world's condition, but from the actions of God. Mary's song calls into question the way things are by proclaiming the way things ought to be. The songs of Christmas proclaim the way things will be when the final victory is won. One hymn this morning draws inspiration from Mary's song and speaks of the transformation of the world that God is bringing about in the birth of Jesus. The refrain of *The Canticle of the Turning* echoes Mary's Magnificat:

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My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn.

Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn.

Mary's song, the Magnificat, has often been called the most revolutionary hymn in the Bible because it proclaims faith in a God who turns the world upside down. William Barclay has written, "There is loveliness in the Magnificat, but in that loveliness there is dynamite. Christianity begets a revolution in each person and a revolution in the world" (*Commentary on Luke*, p. 10).

God gives us a song to sing that captures what is most true about our lives and our hope for the world. In Jesus Christ, God acts to bring peace and healing to human life and to restore the harmony of creation. Blessing comes to us when we learn to sing these irrepressible tunes and move with the rhythms of God's holy actions. When we can't get these songs out of our heads, these songs begin to shape our lives and our actions. We join Mary and thousands of others who see God's hand at work wherever compassion is shown, love triumphs over evil, and justice prevails. This song ignites a joyful revolution in our soul.

Sometimes we are far too preoccupied with our desire to be happy and not concerned enough about joy. Happiness and joy are not the same thing. To a large extent, happiness depends upon the outward circumstances of life. In Greek philosophy, happiness is a by-product of having good health, sufficient wealth, an honest reputation, a purposeful activity and meaningful relationships. No one would argue with this. We all want to be happy. There is

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something that is more important than happiness. This is joy. Joy comes like an unexpected gift from the Lord. Joy can fill our lives even when our health fails, our friends leave us in the lurch, our job runs out, our society cracks open, and our dreams collapse

The English poet, William Wordsworth, had a special appreciation for nature. 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 this particular place had 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 of Mary’s song, we see into the life of things.

Nathan Foster, the author of *The Making of an Ordinary Saint*, said that we practice the spiritual disciplines such as worship, prayer, generosity, confession, serving, and celebration in response to God’s grace. Our spiritual practices open us up to receive the gifts of God. Joy is something we receive; it is not something we can create ourselves or earn for ourselves. Joy is breathing into our lives the Spirit of God. Joy is letting the overflowing well of God’s love flow into us. Our struggles may cause us to hold our breath; our hard experiences may lead us to cap the well of God’s love. Foster says practicing spiritual disciplines is a way of tuning our senses and opening our lives to receive what is already there in God. All we have to do is breathe in the

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love of God and uncap the overflowing well of grace. Foster says that the result of practicing the spiritual disciplines is joy.

Joy connects us to God. Several Advents ago, I met with a member of the congregation I was serving whose husband had died. As we talked about the service, she asked, “Would it be appropriate to sing Christmas Carols in the service?” Of course, and so, we did. We opened the service singing, “O Come All Ye Faithful,” and went out singing, “Joy to the World” As we walked out of the candlelit Chapel at the end of the service, she said with deep joy in her heart, “This is beautiful. This is perfect.”

My favorite Christmas decoration is a small angel with its mouth wide open in song. He 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 are in. He sings for all of us and even for those who cannot sing. I image 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 immigrants in detention centers, and for you and me. Maybe this year we will not pack our angel away but leave him up all year round to remind us to sing Mary’s song of joyful praise.