

Randall D Koehler

Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Isaiah 12; Luke 1:39-55

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Dare to Imagine: Joy

*Opening Prayer:* Let us pray: great creator, surely you are our salvation; we will trust in you; you are our strength and our song. You have made the way for us, revealing to us how your joy sustains us even when we are overwhelmed by darkness, despair, or sadness. Fill us with your Spirit as we long for your arrival, your presence here with us, Emmanuel. Amen

*Message:* Today is the third Sunday of our Advent journey. We have been doing the difficult work of imagination, considering how God might be inviting us to see beyond *what is* to begin seeing *what could be*. We have dared to imagine the possibilities of a god that comes as an infant into our world through a soon-to-be-married young woman. We have dared to imagine the possibilities of a god who acts in ways that do not seem reasonable to us. We have dared to imagine a god who comes peacefully amidst the turmoil and violence of empire like a light piercing the darkness. We have dared to imagine a god that longs for each of us to be restored like a garment vigorously washed or a precious metal melted down. In this advent season, God is calling us to a challenging journey, in which the peace, joy, and love of Jesus transform us.

In this season's ever-shortening hours of daylight, we take a few moments to dare to imagine joy. This past week was the final week of my seminary coursework for the fall semester. I turned in my last assignment, a 20-page project on how I have developed as a person spiritually, socially, physically, psychologically, etc. I would like to say that my heart was filled

with joy when I submitted that final piece of homework alongside a few others on Friday evening. I now have about a month before classes start again. This experience for me was the first example of joy, if I can call it that, that came to mind for me. When was the last time that you experienced God's joy fill you up...?

In our scripture texts this morning, we note how the joy that God offers us through the power of the Holy Spirit is inspired and expressed differently. In Isaiah chapter 12, God's joy takes the form of a song of thanks for the promise, the assurance of a future king who will rule the world in justice and faithfulness. Most likely, these particular parts of Isaiah were written during the very first exile in 722 BCE, almost 150 years prior to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. This time, earlier in the story of the divided kingdom, the Assyrian empire conquered the northern kingdom, often called Ephraim. Even as the first captives were taken to the Assyrian capital, Nineveh, the prophet Isaiah dares to fill their mouths with a song of joy proclaiming the saving work or salvation of God that will come through God's chosen king, one in the line of the great king David.

When I was young, I learned Isaiah 12:2 as a song. Whenever I was afraid, this verse would often come to mind. During my elementary school years, I had panic attacks in the middle of the night. I remember being in that space between wakefulness and sleep, unable to move, feeling as though a weight was pressing on my chest. I couldn't move my arms or legs, and I remember thinking that I had called out for my mom, but I don't know that I ever did. Then I would wake up in a cold sweat. I used Isaiah 12:2 in those moments to calm down. It went like this: *sing the song*. I wonder if this was how the people experienced God's joy, by singing and imagining the future restoration of their lives through God's intervention. When things are most difficult or fear-filled, do you find yourself singing or speaking the promises of God?

Notice also that on either side of verse 2 in Isaiah 12, the people will speak of God's actions on that day... on that day, God will make the final act. Like the seminary work that I completed on that day this week, God's final work will one day be completed, filling each of us with joy at the sight of this universe restored and redeemed. The people of Israel will be filled with joy when God accomplishes the peaceful kingdom that has been promised, when the kingdom has come on earth as it is in heaven. Our joy today is a joy rooted in this future that is in some ways here, but also not yet fully finished, a joy most clearly seen this advent in a promised little baby born to a teenage young woman.

This deep-seated sense of hope, comfort, relief, and peace is the joy that undergirds the songs in Luke 1. Mary has fled Nazareth in Galilee after being visited by the angel Gabriel, who had told her that she would have a child. She goes to her relative Elizabeth's home to the south, several days journey, in Judea. As Sarah and Hannah experienced in the Hebrew scriptures, Elizabeth has become miraculously pregnant despite her years of infertility. Elizabeth is Zechariah's wife, the priest whom we heard from last week. Zechariah is still unable to speak in this moment, awaiting the birth of his promised son. Mary arrives from her long journey at Elizabeth's home, and at the sound of her greeting, Elizabeth's baby leaps, a foreshadowing of how John the Baptist will continue to herald the coming of Jesus as God's anointed one, the Messiah. Elizabeth is startled by the baby's movements and responds in the power of the Spirit with a blessing on Mary for her faithful response to God's calling. Note that a woman, Elizabeth, is the first in Luke to be filled with the Spirit, empowered by God to see or notice how God is working, to affirm Mary's role in it, and to experience the joy of God's redemptive activity.

We can only imagine how Mary felt. Was she seeking comfort and relief in the midst of her fear of how her neighbors might respond to her pregnancy? Who would believe her when she

tried to tell them that an angel had visited her in a dream? How could Joseph ever look at her the same? Would he believe her when she tried to explain? I wonder if these were the kinds of conversations that Elizabeth and Mary shared as they spent those first months of Mary's pregnancy together. Mary was most likely between 12 and 14 years old. Did God fill Elizabeth with the Spirit in order to encourage Mary in what would become a deeply difficult and downright lonely journey toward her first child? What would it mean to celebrate the first-born son with Joseph, who wasn't even really the boy's father? Then again, who was really the father?

Even with all of this swirling around her, Mary responds to Elizabeth's blessing with her own song of joy, the Magnificat. I wonder if this is the song that Mary sang throughout her pregnancy and the early years of Jesus' life, a source of joy for her even when she began to see that her son was going to be so much more than a laborer for the Romans as Joseph had been. Mary's song is filled with the joy of God's faithfulness, heard about in the stories of her ancestors. Mary's song celebrates that God will set the world right, scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful, and sending the rich away empty, while also lifting up the humble and lowly, and filling the hungry with good things.

As we think about these songs that sustained people in joy, what are some songs that come to mind that bring joy to your life, that sustain your imagination? We tend to think that songs sustain us when God's joy has been lost, but we really lose our joy when we give up on imagination, when we no longer see or notice the ways that God is working in us, around us, and through us. We dare to imagine joy today because we dare to proclaim to the rest of the world that our God has not given up or gone silent. We dare to proclaim that our God has come into the world to bring hope, peace, and joy to all people through Jesus, the Christ-child

*Closing Prayer:* Let us pray: God of reckless love, we sing to you in each moment in the joy that you have inspired in us through your saving power. We ask you today to fill us with your Spirit so that we can continue to hold onto the joy and hope that you infuse into our daily lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.