

SERMON TITLE: “Rejoice Always”
TEXT: Luke 1:46b-55; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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We have heard two very different passages of Scripture read this morning.

The first text is one of the most famous songs in the world—the *Magnificat*, Mary’s song, a song of response to the utterly unique, utterly unrepeatable, utterly astonishing announcement that a peasant teenager in a backwater town in a tiny outpost of the first century Roman Empire was going to give birth to the Son of the Most High, the one who would reign over the house of David, the object of Israel’s long hope.

The second text comes from something like an instruction manual written to one of the earliest churches in existence. It is a text that comes in the middle of a longer passage discussing the nature of Christian community.

It is a passage of exhortation—the Apostle Paul is trying to get his listeners to live a certain way, as the newly formed Jesus movement begins to find its feet.

A song and a set of instructions.

So what, if anything, does the song have to do with the instructions? What do these two texts have to say to us here on this Third Sunday of Advent?

On the First Sunday of Advent we talked about watchfulness. This was followed last week by a focus on the theme of repentance as part of our preparation for the coming of Christ and his rule in the world and our lives.

Today, we move toward the theme of rejoicing at Christ’s arrival.

Our two texts are very different today, but I think they are connections between the two.

We begin with the *Magnificat* in the first chapter of Luke.

It is a famous song, of course, recited or sung in worship by our high-church brothers and sisters, set to music by Bach in 1723 for a Christmas Eve service, or, on a more popular level, brought to life by the Beatles about 250 years later:

When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.

Whether our familiarity with Mary and her song comes from high or low culture, I think it is important to notice that the song is more than a spontaneous response to the news that she was going to have a very famous baby. It is that, but it is *more* than that as well.

Mary's song is quite literally saturated in the hope of Israel.

Virtually every line refers to other parts of the Hebrew Bible, summarizing and encapsulating the longing and expectation of her people—the people of the promise.

Its themes are familiar ones:

- The holiness, mercy, and strength of God
- The upside-down nature of God's work in the world
 - o The scattering of the proud;
 - o The dethroning of the powerful and arrogant;
 - o The raising up of the lowly;
 - o The filling of the hungry with "good things."
- **The unshakeable conviction that when Israel's God comes, it is good news for those used to being on the short end of the stick**

We see similar themes at another crucial point in God's story.

In 1 Samuel 2, we see the Song of Hannah at the birth of her son, the prophet Samuel, who would go on to anoint the first two kings of Israel's history.

A few passages from Hannah's song:

Then Hannah prayed and said:

"My heart rejoices in the LORD;
in the LORD my horn is lifted high...

² "There is no one holy like the LORD;
there is no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God...

⁴ "The bows of the warriors are broken,
but those who stumbled are armed with strength.

⁵ Those who were full hire themselves out for food,
but those who were hungry are hungry no more.

She who was barren has borne seven children,
but she who has had many sons pines away.

⁶ "The LORD brings death and makes alive;
he brings down to the grave and raises up.

⁷ The LORD sends poverty and wealth;
he humbles and he exalts.
⁸ He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes
and has them inherit a throne of honor...

Like Hannah, at least half a century prior, Mary's soul magnifies the Lord because the Lord is on the side of the weak and the oppressed, because his mercy is shown to those who humble themselves—those who, like Mary herself only a few verses earlier, simply say, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

In our passage from Luke, rejoicing is a natural and exuberant response to the faithfulness of God in keeping his promise to his people. The God of liberation and justice and peace and table turning and reorienting and inverting—the object of Israel's long hope—was coming.

It was celebration time!

Even though life still contained hardship and misfortune, even though Mary's people continued to be oppressed, ignored, and mistreated, Emmanuel—God with us!—was on the way.

Half a century later, to an infant church in Thessalonica, Paul says, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

The baby boy that had inspired Mary's song several decades earlier had grown up, lived, taught, inspired, annoyed, healed, fed, confused, and enraged his people, and had been cruelly executed on a crude Roman cross.

A few years later, a movement was starting—a movement of Jesus followers who were spreading, slowly but surely, throughout the Roman Empire fueled by the conviction that this strange Jewish rabbi had been raised from the dead, was alive and active, and was the means through which God was reconciling all things to himself (Colossians 1:20).

It was a movement that was met with resistance right from the beginning. There were riots in city streets when Paul came to town (e.g., Acts 17:1-9; 19:23-41).

The early Christians were persecuted and mistreated for their faith. There was intense opposition from the Jewish community in the city of the church to whom Paul's letter was written.

Right from the beginning, being a follower of Jesus was a recipe for trouble.

And yet, Paul says, “**Rejoice always.**”

Like Mary, Paul’s words come from the sidelines of power and influence, from the ordinary reality of a life characterized by both good and bad, in a world where God’s will is not yet done, on earth as it is in heaven.

But Paul’s instructions are grounded in the same reality as Mary’s song.

God is at work. God is faithful. God keeps his promise.

Two thousand years later, these words come to us too. This song and these instructions...

Rejoice! Always. Magnify the Lord. Give thanks. The Mighty One has done great things.... He has brought down the powerful... lifted up the lowly...filled the hungry with good things.

Except for the powerful are still around, still oppressing the weak and the voiceless. The lowly are still, well, *lowly*. The hungry often still await their “good things.”

What does it mean to say, “Rejoice always” in a world like this—a world where the hope and promise of Advent is still in the process of being born among and within us?

Is it even responsible to rejoice “always” in a world that contains so much tragedy and pain and waste? Is it even *right* to rejoice when there is so much in our world and in our lives that is not as it should be?

Would it not be the equivalent of sticking our heads in the sand or our fingers in our ears to be happy when there is so much going on that quite rightly ought to make us sad, that ought to break our hearts just as it breaks God’s?

Does Paul expect us to walk around with a smile plastered on our face, no matter how good or badly things might be going in our lives.

I don’t think so.

Paul, of all people, knew hardship. 2 Corinthians 11:23-29 contains a catalogue of Paul’s sufferings, if you want evidence: stoned, beaten, lashed with a whip, travel nightmares, mistreatment from religious people, sleepless, hungry, thirsty... the list goes on.

Paul, of all people, knew that a joyful life was not dependent upon the quality of his experience.

I think that the rejoicing that Paul is talking about here is one that transcends our circumstances, one that is grounded in a truth beyond, behind, above, and around the circumstances of our individual lives—the truth that we are a part of the “all things” being reconciled to God in Christ.

We’re not very good at this kind of rejoicing.

As a culture, we are obsessed with engineering happiness. We go to seminars, we take pills, we practice mindfulness and yoga, we consult “happiness experts” and therapists, and we try to reverse aging process...

And yet, according to a recent article in the *New Scientist*, North Americans have among the highest rates of depression and suicide in the world.

Despite enjoying historically unprecedented material comfort, the happiness we crave often eludes us.

Perhaps it is because the kind of joy we seek—the kind of joy we were made for—is not the sort of thing that we can engineer. It’s not something we can manufacture with the right techniques or summon with the right words.

It is simply a gift we can continually open ourselves up to and receive.

Like Mary, we can adopt a posture of humility and gratitude—“I am the Lord’s servant, let it be with me according to your word.”

Like Paul, we can hold fast to what is good and abstain from evil. We can give thanks in all circumstances for we know that the love and fidelity of the God we serve is bigger and deeper and more lasting than our circumstances.

Joy cannot be manufactured but it can be nourished and cultivated.

And, over time, if we determine to be open to God’s gifts in God’s time, if we determine to live as Paul encouraged the Thessalonian church to live, we may just find that we are becoming people of joy.

We may just find that our habits and our hearts are being shaped and guided by joy even in the midst of the peaks and valleys of life.

Mark Buchanan is a pastor and writer from Vancouver Island whose work I have come to appreciate over the years. I like what he says about this in an essay called “Growing Up Here, and There” in an anthology of Canadian religious writing called *Northern Lights*:

Following Jesus means that you're happy to stay and happy to leave. Any place can become home, and none. Jesus helps us love the earth more and the world less. He deepens our capacity to cherish and relish things and yet slowly weans us from our cravings, our dependencies, our expectations. He mends us in places we didn't know we were broken and breaks us in places where, before his advent, we were utterly content. We start to enjoy more and demand less. Almost everything feels like a gift, not a possession, not an entitlement. He teaches us to live with our hands open, wide open, and our arms, too, so that we lose more but receive more as well.

Like all of the virtues in the life of faith, this will take time. It won't happen overnight. It's not as easy as just hearing a sermon and saying, "All right then, I guess I'll wake up tomorrow and start rejoicing always!" If only.

Following Jesus and having our character conformed to his is a journey.

But wherever we are on this journey, we can have confidence that just as true joy does not depend upon circumstances, so the success of our journey does not, ultimately, depend upon our feeble efforts.

Even if things look bleak or futile, even when joy seems miles away, the same words that the angel spoke to a frightened and confused Mary are true for us: "For nothing will be impossible with God."

The same words Paul wrote to a persecuted church two thousand years, are true for us: "The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it" (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

Ultimately, this is the one sure foundation of the life of joy: the promise and character of God.

We are held by the same God whose coming inspired Mary's song, the same God who filled Paul with joy, even amidst incredible hardship—the God of the creation and redemption, the God of salvation, the God of Advent.

Thanks be to God.