

Sunday, December 17, 2023 ***“Where is your joy?”***

Isaiah 61:1-11 John 1:6-8 Matthew 1:18-25

It's the Third Sunday of Advent which means that most preparations for the Advent/Christmas season should be well underway. With Christmas Eve and Advent 4 falling on the same Sunday our preparations may seem a bit rushed this year but the reality is what it is. In the midst of all of this, have you experienced joy? Or have you allowed even the smallest inconveniences or unmet expectations to harm your joy while you're working on Christmas? Have you had times of emotional breakdowns as you plan experiences for others only to be disappointed or wondering where the joy went?

Maybe words were shared which indicated high stress or worry or even out of anger from different situations. And as a result, there were miscommunications or problems which arose amongst your family members or friends. Maybe you just let the joy be moved out of your reach as you dwelt on the moment and neglected to remember the joy of God's gift of Jesus to you!

Just for a moment, put yourself in Mary's place. Here she was young, unmarried, pregnant and has to tell Joseph about what has occurred. But Mary did not have to do this, as an angel of God appeared to him in a dream and told him the story. He was to take Mary as his wife for her unborn baby is of the Holy Spirit. Joseph listened to the angel's story and later that day took the time to talk with Mary. Mary was sad and was uncertain of her future at that moment but she also knew that when the angel had spoken to her about what was to occur, she agreed. She had stated, "I am the Lord's servant. Let everything you've said happen to me." (Luke 1:38) But little did she know that something big was to occur. The first ever- nationwide census was going to take place. And since she and Joseph would marry, she belonged to the House of Joseph's family and had to travel to Bethlehem to be registered.

Mary knew her time was coming when the baby was to be born. She sure didn't want to travel to a new community at 9 months pregnant, not knowing where she was going and taking a long time to get there as she was so uncomfortable. Did Mary feel joyful as they traveled to Bethlehem? How much complaining did she do? She had reason to do so- no doubt what poor Joseph and God heard was probably similar! She had to travel from her home to Bethlehem— alone with Joseph. She was in labour and ready to give birth to her baby. They had no place to stay as the community's hotels were sold out. They ended up staying in a barn cave surrounded by animals because the innkeeper took pity on her as she was in labour. And then she gives

birth to the baby. Soon after she had strange and unexpected visitors. How joyful was she? Her 'first Christmas' was not the best but what is recorded for us is simply these words—"Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." Luke 2:19

What did Mary think/ feel/ and "treasure"? Would these treasures be considered joys today? An older folk song describes the Seven Joys of Mary, as a devotional to events of the life of this woman chosen by God. These Seven Joys are frequently depicted in medieval devotional literature and art. The seven joys are usually listed as: The Annunciation; The Nativity of Jesus; The Adoration of the Magi; The Resurrection of Christ; The Ascension of Christ to Heaven; The Pentecost or Descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and Mary's ascent or Coronation of the Virgin in Heaven. In the midst of Mary's life there was much sadness and sorrow—but there were key moments of Joy as listed above. And Mary knew to look for those moments even before Jesus was born. She had accepted the task of being the mother of the Messiah not really knowing what was to occur. Yet her joy was fulfilled through Christ Jesus.

Our reading from Isaiah 61 is the good news of God's deliverance prophesied hundreds of years before Jesus' birth. Isaiah states what the Messiah is going to do when He comes to earth. And it is this passage that Jesus reads from the scroll when he visits the synagogue. After reading it, he tells those listening, that this is his purpose on earth. The leaders scoff at him and ask who he think he is saying that this is his life's purpose. Yet Jesus just takes it in stride and walks away. Jesus' purpose is made clear in this prophecy but it is also reflected in John's gospel as John testifies to the One who is the light. This light came into the world and grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. One can only imagine the joy John had in writing these words about Jesus and telling his message of compassion and love to others.

As we hear these words what is it that is in your hearts/ minds? What are you thinking or reflecting upon—are you pondering them as Mary pondered and looked into the eyes of her infant son? Where is your joy?

Have you had moments of joy lately? Not just those moments when you smiled a half baked smile at someone's joke or teasing, but when something occurred and your heart was filled with joy- true joy?

How do you find joy in your everyday activities?

1. Maybe you enjoy a great cup of coffee in morning. Do you pay attention to how it tastes. Maybe there is something else that awakens your taste buds as you find joy.
2. What about music? Do certain kinds of song resonate how you feel. Maybe you need to turn off all of your devices, close your eyes, and really listen.
3. Maybe there is a movie a show something that makes you laugh each time you see it. Laughing is one of the best ways to experience a moment of joy.
4. Daydream. It can be about anything, where you'd like to be in that moment? Whether on beach or on a mountain.
5. Listen to the rain. Watch snow flakes fall Or the birds chirping. Hear the breeze. Or the sound of your breath- give thanks for life.
6. Take a hot shower. And notice how it's cleansing in more ways than one.
7. Stretch, even if you simply reach your arms up to the sky for a moment, right now.
8. Be grateful for tiny things. Like the softness of your pillow. Or the color of the sky. Or the way the light reflects on a window.
9. Snuggle with a pet. Or a stuffed animal!
10. Do something kind for someone else – a simple check in can do wonders.

These are only a few suggestions of where one might experience joy. But where are you looking for your joy in this moment?

Mary was so connected to God and his purpose that it led her to experience complete joy in the midst of chaos. She was not afraid; there is no record of bitterness, anger, despair or complaining. She willingly walked out every step that God laid before her and beheld the gift of these moments. Even from the beginning when Angel Gabriel approached her and proclaimed her to be highly favoured she responds with humility as a servant in faith. We must remember that this was not her plan; yes she would probably have married Joseph anyway; but not become pregnant right away. Everything is out of her control. She says yes to it all and this is the beginning of many great moments of her life.

While we might not understand our hardships, disappointments, or the paths we are on or redirected to, maybe we can allow Mary to teach us something about the journey of joy discovered as we walk everything out with God, one step at a time.

Often when we experience joy it is when we arrive at something we do not yet have. One day-marriage, healed, dream job, feeling up to it, when circumstances change, when all is perfect or in balance when there is more money. This is often used in conjunction with the If onlys of regret because the moments of joy are forever gone. Moments if only- should have been savoured, intentional, chosen wrongly, or hadn't lost an opportunity, or the need to go again. This is the type of joy that slips between our fingers and leaves us empty.

So what do we need to do? We need to stop and claim joy for ourselves. Joy is found in the present and as we walk with God. We read in John 15: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ... I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." (John 15:5, 11). These verses give us a clear picture of complete joy no matter our circumstances. IT is also what Mary did as she stepped into her calling.

Jesus reminds us that real joy is found in connection to him. When we have been emptied out, or lacking any kind of happiness, God is there waiting for us. He is the one we need to connect with in order to receive complete joy. What did Mary say to Gabriel? "I am the Lord's servant. Let everything you've said happen to me." This was a day of Joy for Mary. We need to find our joy. For when we celebrate the coming of Christ into the world, Joy Has Dawned upon the world. This is God's gift to us born of Mary and is Jesus a baby in Bethlehem and now the Lord of life and history. When we sing "Joy to the world" it is because Jesus is born to bring change to the world and we know that this is what the world needs right now—Hope Peace and Joy!

Let us pray

God of grace and love we thank you for the JOY of Jesus who comes to us at Christmas. Through him we live and love others, but we need encouragement and strength to see us through those times which we might find difficult. Show us again the joy which comes in Christ. And enable us to ponder these moments like Mary. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.