

Natalie W. Bell
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 Fourth Sunday Advent

Joy in a Weary World
Luke 1:39-55

³⁹ *In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,* ⁴⁰ *where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.*

⁴¹ *When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And **Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit** ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "**Blessed** are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb **leaped for joy**. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be^[e] a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*

And Mary^[f] said,

"My **soul magnifies** the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my **spirit rejoices** in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me **blessed**;

⁴⁹ for the **Mighty One has done great things** for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His **mercy** is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown **strength** with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the **powerful** from their thrones,
and lifted up the **lowly**;

⁵³ he has filled the **hungry** with good things,
and sent the **rich** away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Have you ever heard a woman in your life tell **a birth story?**

Maybe you have a mom who likes to share that around a family dinner table to embarrass you?

Women have these stories about their children, and they often get passed on to future generations, especially when the baby is very large, or born in the car on the way to the hospital!

So can you imagine Mary's birth story?

I wonder if she told it to Jesus over and over again, I wonder if he rolled his eyes and said "Yes, Mama".

Can you imagine what she might say?

"Well, son, it was not a typical pregnancy, With you being conceived by the Holy Spirit! You can't imagine how scared I was when an angel told me everything that would happen.

It caused a lot of **pain and frustration for your father,** and some **shame** for both of us, considering how all of it transpired before the wedding!

But that time was **also full of so much wonder, and hope.** Aunt Elizabeth was pregnant with your cousin John at the time, and I went to stay with her.

I was so **overwhelmed with joy,** I literally **preached,** almost like a prophet, son!

And when the time came for **you to be born,** Well that's a whole other story. We were traveling to Bethlehem for the census, which is no small feat for a very pregnant woman. And then to add to our stress, there was literally **no room** for us to stay in any respectable house, so....you were born in a **manger.** It was noisy, and smelly, **and well....BEAUTIFUL.**

“I know, Mama, I know”.

***Now listen again, son,
because the story is even bigger, remember?***

It was so beautiful that ***shepherds*** came to see you,
with tales of hearing your birth announced by angels!
And they weren’t the only special visitors,
Later ***wise men*** came from the East,
bearing gifts like we had never seen before!

I don’t want you to ever forget this story, Jesus.

Never forget ***where*** you came from, and ***whose*** child you are.
Your life is ***so much bigger*** than all of us.

Can you picture Mary, ***sharing that story again and again*** with her son, Jesus?

Most moms have ***a birth story that includes plenty of pain,
And lots of joy***—especially when they see their precious child.
Women can endure hours, and hours of pain and labor,
Unexpected surgeries, dangerous complications,
And still believe it’s all worth it,
because of the little new life brought into the world.

So Mary’s story, like our stories, is a story of pain, AND joy.

In fact, in the Eastern Orthodox tradition they refer to Mary as ***“Bright Sadness”***
Because joy and sorrow come together in her life. <https://www.oca.org/reflections/misc-authors/bright-sadness1>

And ***finding joy in the middle of pain*** seems like a great idea for all of us,
Especially ***this Christmas***.

We’ve seen so much pain—personally, and in our country and world.
The pandemic is not over, so much injustice surrounds us.
It seems fitting for us to ***remember the story*** of Jesus’ birth,
And the ***way that joy came***—in the midst of the pain.

Jesus’ birth was not a beautiful Christmas card scene.
It was ***real, down to earth, and in many ways very painful***—

The day Jesus was born they probably felt like it was one of those days when **EVERYTHING** that can possibly go wrong, went wrong!

Yet, it was in **THAT environment that JOY itself was born.**
Jesus WAS the joy!

Our scripture today is known as the Magnificat or Mary's Song.
It describes in detail God's great power and mercy.
And let's be honest—Mary is **preaching**, isn't she?
This is a definitely a **sermon**.

And **not just any sermon**—
she is preaching about the **Messiah**,
the Savior, the one all God's people have been waiting for all these years.
She is preaching **like prophets and priests** before her, long before her,
and using stories passed down, of God's goodness and salvation.

This is the good news that people have been waiting for—
it is the story of **joy, right in the middle of pain.**

I wonder, how does Jesus' story shape our lives, today?
What would YOU say—if YOU were to preach this Christmas?
What stories **will you** share this year—of God in your life?

We all have stories that **shape our lives---**
So, where is the **good news and joy in our stories?**

Mary told a story like other women who had been blessed by God with children,
in supernatural ways—
women like **Sarah** giving birth in her old age,
or **Hannah** who was barren until she prayed for a child.

In fact, Mary's song is strikingly similar to **Hannah's song** from 1 Samuel 2,
A song she probably heard from her parents---
Where Hannah says:
*The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low, he also exalts.*

⁸ *He raises up the poor from the dust;
 he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
 to make them sit with princes
 and inherit a seat of honor.^[c]
 For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's,
 and on them he has set the world.*

The words of Mary's Magnificat are so **familiar because they are echoed throughout the Bible.**

In **Jesus' first sermon** in Luke 4,
 he goes to the temple and reads from the scroll of Isaiah, saying:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
 because he has anointed me
 to bring **good news** to the poor.
 to proclaim **release** to the captives
 and recovery of **sight** to the blind,
 to let the **oppressed** go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

I'm sure that Mary and Joseph shared **the prophecies** about the Savior
 with Jesus as he was growing up.

Mary knew the **Scriptures**—
 She knew about **God's goodness in a world of pain and suffering.**
 So **she preached about that goodness.**

And all of these sermons have **similar themes,**
because they are declaring the goodness of the same God--
 the blind regain sight,
 and the poor receive more,
 the powerful are brought low,
 and the lowly exalted,
 the oppressed go free,
 and all experience new life.

And all of these sermons can all be summed up in **2 words: GOOD NEWS.**

Good News.

And not just any good news—**good news of great JOY for all people**—
just as the angels announced at Jesus' birth.

Jesus' was THE ultimate Good News of salvation and new life.

It was GOOD news in a world full of BAD NEWS.

There was plenty of bad news back then, too.

No social media or television,

But people suffered, they experienced pain,

They were severely oppressed.

It was a **broken and weary** world—just like ours today.

And people needed—**desperately needed**—

to hear about **hope, and joy**.

And **Jesus—WAS the joy!**

I think it's so **easy to think that this Christmas,**

We might be **missing true joy**.

We may be separated from loved ones,

We've seen so much grief and sorrow all year long.

So, how can we experience JOY in the middle of this weary world?

I wonder if we find it by **paying attention** to what God is doing around us.

And believing that God is at work in our lives?

What if we hang onto the words of Mary, and all of the Christmas story,

Believing that the **good news of great joy** still comes to us today?

And sometimes, that joy comes in **unexpected** times and places, doesn't it?

Ever had **joy just show up in your life—in the middle of pain?**

Where is the **joy** in your life story?

I remember when one of our family members was suffering in ICU,
barely responsive,

the hospital allowed our family to be there with him,

and we put out a phone and played his favorite music---and we **danced**.

We danced around his bed.

He loved to dance, and I think he loved us being there dancing near him.
It was **joy—in the weariness of pain and illness**.

Joy comes **alongside the pain and suffering** of this world, doesn't it?
joy can come in the middle of grief,
It can show up when things seem to be at their worst.

Kathy Escobar, who wrote the book, *A Weary World*, says that we need to
embrace PARADOX, especially at Christmas.

Our **temptation is to live in a black and white world**,
instead of acknowledging the gray.
We tend to believe that things are either **good, OR bad**,
when in reality good and bad occur **together**.
We can **experience BOTH—at the same time**.

Why is that important?

It's important because our **God gives us lives full of paradox**.
The **Christmas story**, in fact the entire Bible, is full of it—
pain and wonder, struggle and hope---all together.

So, when we realize that **paradox, or holding two opposites together**,
Is actually **a GOOD THING**—THAT can bring us hope and life.

We start to realize that when we find ourselves
hating something, we can also look for the **love**.
When we fall into **despair**, we can also look for the **hope**.

It may seem easier **to live in an all or nothing world**. Good or bad.
And Christians try this all the time,
We even throw around guilt at people
Who won't just put a happy face on everything!
And of course, we want the **bad to just be over—to be done with it**.
So we often ignore or gloss over the bad...trying to make it good.

But the truth is that life is BOTH good and bad,

Beautiful and ugly,

Peaceful and chaotic,

All rolled into one!

Isn't that so true?

Light and dark do exist side by side....

and sometimes ***we need the dark*** to bring out the brightest lights,
like sparkling stars, in a dark night sky!

Mary's baby boy ***brought her Joy*** beyond measure,

But she was soon reminded by Simeon that

This child would be opposed,

and ***"a sword would pierce her own soul too"***.

After all, Jesus was not her own,

and he would pay the ultimate price for his ministry.

But that's the secret—***joy comes in the middle of all that--***

the good, the bad, the light, the dark....

And it is **GOOD NEWS**—***of great joy for ALL people in a weary world,***
Including Us.

Friends, a Savior has been born for us this Christmas, and he is Christ our Lord.

He comes with ***joy, into our pain.***

And for this greatest gift, all God's people can say, Amen.