

***Joy that Joins***  
**Sermon 206 | Greystone Baptist Church | December 10, 2023**  
**Luke 1:24-45**

*I seemed to be standing in a bus queue by the side of a long mean street. Evening was just closing in and it was raining.*

*I had been wandering for hours in similar mean streets,  
always in the rain and  
always in evening twilight.*

*Time seemed to have paused on that dismal moment  
when only a few shops have lit up  
and it is not yet dark enough for their windows to look cheering.*

*And just as the evening never advanced to night,  
so my walking had never brought me  
to the better parts of the town.*

*However far I went I found only dingy lodging houses,  
small tobacco shops [...] windowless warehouses, goods stations without trains,  
and bookshops of the sort that sell *The Works of Aristotle*.  
I never met anyone.*

*But for the little crowd at the bus stop, the whole town seemed to be empty. I think that was why I attached myself to the queue.*

*I had a stroke of luck right away, for just as I took my stand a little waspish woman who would have been ahead of me snapped out at a man who seemed to be with her, "Very well, then. I won't go at all. So there," and left the queue. "Pray don't imagine," said the man in a very dignified voice, "that I care about going in the least. I have only been trying to please you, for peace sake. My own feelings are of course a matter of no importance. I quite understand that" - and suiting the action to the word he also walked away.*

*"Come," thought I, "that's two places gained."<sup>1</sup>*

These are the first words of a short little book called, *The Great Divorce*, it was written by C.S. Lewis in 1945. The scene carries on and the narrator continues to move up places in

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*. p.11-12

line as the bickering and arguing of other line-standers leads them to scurry off in different directions.

By the time the bus arrives, the line is greatly diminished, due to dreary attitudes. The bus driver though, in stark contrast to everyone in the line, seems joyful almost - full of light - is how Lewis writes it.

The nerve!! -the line-waiters remarked - *Who does he think he is?*

Who does he think he is?

With such audacity to be joyful in dreary days such as these?

What tricks does he have up his sleeve?

*Just who does he think he is?*

I wonder if this is what people might have thought if they had been there at Elizabeth's house that day? When Mary came knocking at the door and her cousin greeted her there.

Who do they think they are? - being joyful in times like these?

It was the time of Roman rule, when peace was established with military might and the religious institutions were in bed with the government. Women didn't have a place of authority or even autonomy, but were subject to the governance of the men in their lives. How could they find joy in times like these?

Zechariah's voice was gone. Elizabeth with her geriatric pregnancy and now Mary, an unwed teenager, was expecting too? New life is always something to celebrate, but like *this? Now? And under these circumstances?*

For Mary, there were a million reasons to retreat and isolate and try to make sense of it all. ...A litany of logical reasons to be afraid and anxious. Women were stoned for lesser crimes than this and if she dared speak the truth about how it all happened, people would start to talk, they might even say she'd gone mad.

And what about Joseph? What in the world would he do with a fiancé carrying news such as this?

There were a million reasons to keep this "good" news to herself. To withdraw and hide away until she could wrap her mind around it, until she could work out a plan. But Mary doesn't retreat, in fact she does the exact opposite. She immediately puts her feet to the path and travels the 80 mile journey from Nazareth to the Judean countryside.

Luke doesn't give us a whole lot of insight as to the inner workings of Mary's mind or how this *long* journey actually happened. We do not know the questions with which she wrestled, surely she had some big ones. We do not know who - if anyone - traveled with her. *It would have been dangerous and unheard of for a young woman to travel alone.* While we may never know the fullness of this story, we can see evidence of Mary's courage, of her resolve, of her choice to rejoice even when the source of that joy itself would have been quite the scandal.

So Mary positions herself away from fear and despair and starts the long walk toward the one person who can share in this scandalous incarnation of joy.

Let us be clear that this joy is not only scandalous because of the bodies through whom it will be delivered: An old woman, long past her prime and an unmarried girl, not yet ready to become a mother. These facts alone would make this joy audacious. But there is so much more to that which is being born here.

You see the thing is, when the angels announce these two miraculous pregnancies, it is clear that these will be no ordinary children. These two will not fit into the status quo, no, they will challenge it at every turn. John will prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. He will be a prophet, similar to Elijah, who urges people to repent, to change their ways, and to return to God. And Jesus, the son in Mary's womb, will *be* that Messiah, people will call him the Son of God, and his kingdom will replace all the kingdoms of this world, *this* kingdom, the one ushered in by Mary's own son, will reign forever.

You can begin to see why this particularly exquisite joy must be contained, right?

Current kings do not appreciate rivals; they are not keen to usher in new kingdoms. Just as religious people do not like to be told that they too need to repent. These are dangerous pregnancies and dangerous prophecies signaling new realities, and new realities are not met without resentment and resistance.

So the joy that caused the baby to leap in Elizabeth's womb is an audacious joy, a defiant joy, a scandalous joy, stubborn joy... it is a persistent joy that sticks around and looms in places that conventional joy has long deserted.

This is precisely the kind of joy that Dr. Willie James Jennings finds in the stories of his African American ancestors. It is joy that echoes the liberating joy found throughout scripture and it is perpetuating *this* joy that Jennings believes is a pathway to peace. And friends, if we are aware of the state of things these days, I believe we ought to pay attention to *anything* that could be a pathway to peace.

*So how could joy be a pathway to peace, we may ask?*

Well first, we have to sort of re-frame the way we think about joy. We may be accustomed to thinking about joy like we think about happiness. As such, joy would be a feeling, an

emotional response to positive experiences and comfortable circumstances. But that is not real joy. No, that is something else, something *less*.

Real joy, according to Jennings, is not emotion but joy is *work*.

Joy work, he says, "is a profound work of improvisation. And improvisation is never just making things up, it is working with the given, the broken, the fragment... the gestures of those who have gone before you and those who surround you, those who engaged in their own work of improvisation."<sup>2</sup> Friends, sharing in the gift and work of joy.

In this improvisational work of joy, "we are constantly moving, twisting, turning between despair and surviving, despair and thriving... [In this work we are choosing to live with] an oppositional joy that stands against the existing and segregated order [laid out in front of us]. It makes pain productive without justifying or glorifying suffering..."<sup>3</sup> And it is precisely this kind of choice toward joy, choice toward healing, choice toward improvisational living that we find in the life and ministry of Jesus who says in the Gospel of John:

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; Abide in my love...I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. Love one another, as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends....I have called you *friends*... -selections from John 15

This joy implanted in the very bodies of Elizabeth and Mary had begun its work and called them together - as cousins and as friends. Mary and Elizabeth had to be together so that they could share in the work of joy. Maybe they needed one another for strength and resolve so that they could rejoice in the midst of their fear. Maybe their joy for one another allowed them to experience the joy of their own individual circumstances. In that way, joy became the bridge. Have you ever experienced that? Have you ever been a part of that kind of work? Have you ever had a friend or been a friend or *made* a friend as you shared or upheld joy for one another?

[Maybe take a moment right now to give God thanks for those friends.]

The book by C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*; it begins with the words I read just a few moments ago. A gray, dreary world, void of relationship and ripe with bickering interactions. Even in the line, the one place where people gathered, there was conflict which led to further separation.

Distance grew and grew between people. As the story progresses, we learn that this is Lewis's imaginative description of hell.

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<sup>2</sup> Willie James Jennings, Sermon *Joy that Gathers*. <https://youtu.be/7jGG5ZtABH0?si=3rRzVLuQow9K9P-r>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

But there are other scenes in the book that take place in another kind of landscape: heaven. And in these scenes as people struggle with the heaviness of reality, they move in a different direction. Instead of moving further and further apart, rather than creating more distance, they move in the opposite direction, they move toward one another - just like Mary and Elizabeth. It makes me think more about the connection between joy and improvisation.

Have you all ever seen the show, *Who's Line is it Anyway?* I think it's one of the funniest shows around and no matter what kind of day I've had, no matter the mood I'm in, that show can always make me laugh. And as I've been thinking about that this week I've come to realize that I don't think it would be funny at all if it was a show of improvisational monologues. I don't think improv works that way. Remember what Dr. Willie Jennings said?

"Improvisation is never just making things up,  
it is working with the given, the broken, the fragment...  
the gestures of those who have gone before you and those who surround you,  
those who engaged in their own work of improvisation"

Could it be that joy, the *holy work* of joy, the spiritual *gift* of joy, Jesus joy is a joy that opens us out rather than closes us in? Could it be that "the very form of joy and pleasure and contentment and comfort that [we] imagine in [our enclosed spaces] can actually [grow, becoming] something far richer, far more beautiful, far more pleasurable" as it is expanded and constituted with "some of the very people who [we imagined] to be part of our despair?"

If so, could it be that joy - as both gift and work - is a bridge that can span our differences and our sorrows - leading us to creative solutions we never thought possible?

In short, could it be that joy work is peace-work... Could learning to share in one another's JOY lead to peace in our personal relationships, peace in our local communities, peace in our politics, peace in our nation, maybe even peace on earth?

It might - at first - sound like a bit of a stretch, but just think about it. Think about your friends, ... the ways they hold you up and hold you together in times of joy and in times of pain. Feeling what *you* with with you and for you, giving you permission and validation... Making you feel *seen and known and loved*...

That kind of friendship is transformational. and it is holy.

Remember the words of Jesus who called his disciples *friends* and then told them to go and love the way he loved. What if we took that part of scripture seriously? What if Christians around the world were known first and foremost as *friends*, improvisational people who were used to working with that which is broken, fragmented, and incomplete... [pew those are words that describe our world!]

And what if we, in working with all that is broken, were committed to joy work - work which turns away from despair, work which leads to and enables healing, surviving, and thriving *together*.

Not as enemies in competition with one another,  
Not as foes working against one another,  
not as people who are characterized by our differences,  
but as *friends* bonded together in the sharing of our joy.

Can you even imagine that kind of world?...Jesus did. And I believe that God.... still does.

I have said these things to you  
so that my joy may be IN you,  
And that your joy may be complete.

Love one another, as I have loved you.  
...I have called you *friends*...

Amen.