

## **“Son of Mary” Luke 1:26–56**

### **Joy**

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, and our theme is joy. Most of us associate joy with happy moments—good news, holidays, or hearing “cancer free.” But that kind of joy depends on circumstances: you don’t need to be a Christian to experience that kind of joy. Everyone feels joy when life goes well.

Yet, hardship finds all of us. When suffering comes—whether from illness, loss, or systemic injustice like racism or the 2008 Subprime mortgage crisis—how can we be joyful? If joy is just a feeling, it’s impossible.

But Christian joy is deeper. Remember Paul’s words: “We also rejoice in our sufferings.” Joy is not pretending everything is fine. It is an act—a choice. Theologian Willie James Jennings calls it: “Joy is an act of resistance against despair.” It is the decision to take one more step forward, trusting the God who has promised, “I will save you.” Joy is the courage to hope again. Joy is the strength to rise again. Joy is an act of resistance rooted in faith. And Mary—Mary is the one who lives out this kind of joy.

### **A Town in Galilee Called Nazareth**

Last week I said, “It’s not only what God said and did that matters—when God said and did it also matters.” Today we add one more truth: where something is said also matters. Our Scripture begins like this: “Six months later, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a young woman named Mary.” (Luke 1:26) Good news from God comes to Mary in Nazareth, a small town in Galilee. Not Jerusalem. Not the religious center. Not the place of power. Why Galilee? Why Nazareth?

[ppt] As you can see in the map, Galilee was located in the northern part of Israel—far from Jerusalem, far from the political and religious center. People in Jerusalem often looked down on Galileans. They called them “half-Jews,” “uneducated people,” “country folk.” Remember what Nathanael said when Philip told him, “We found the one Moses wrote about... Jesus of Nazareth”? He replied, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” In today’s words, it means, “Nothing good comes from a place like that.” Even their own people discriminated against them.

We often picture Galilee as the peaceful region around the lake where Jesus called fishermen. But Galilee was also farmland—full of struggling farmers crushed by the weight of Roman taxation. When a family couldn’t pay the heavy taxes, Rome simply took their land. Many farmers were forced into slavery. Because of these injustices, Galilee was a place where resistance movements often arose. For that reason, both Roman authorities and Jewish leaders viewed Galileans as *potential troublemakers*, even *rebels*.

In fact, around the very time Mary received the announcement of Jesus’ birth, a major revolt broke out in Sepphoris, the capital of Galilee—only about four miles from Nazareth. If you drive from Asbury to Zion, that’s about the same distance. It was the next town over. When the revolt happened, what did Rome do? Rome sent in troops, burned the entire city to the ground, killed thousands, and sold the survivors into slavery. An entire city disappeared in a day. Scholars say it is very likely that Mary had relatives or neighbors who were killed or taken as slaves in that massacre.

When the angel came to Mary, she may have still been grieving—perhaps an uncle killed by Roman soldiers, a cousin taken into slavery, a neighbor’s home destroyed. We often imagine Mary as a simple, innocent, obedient young woman who lived a quiet life. But Mary may have known trauma, fear, loss—things we can hardly imagine. In the land called “Galilee of the Gentiles,” a land despised by others... In a region scarred by Rome’s violence... At the darkest moment of Galilee’s history... It is there that God announces the birth of the Savior. Not in the halls of power. Not in Jerusalem’s temples. But in Nazareth—a town nobody respected, a place soaked in sorrow and oppression. This is where the good news begins.

### **Joy Is an Act of Resistance Against Despair**

When Gabriel comes to Mary, the angel greets her with the words, “Rejoice, highly favored one!” But Mary’s reality was anything but joyful. She lived with poverty and hunger. She carried the trauma of witnessing Rome’s violence and brutality. To someone who had seen so much suffering, to someone whose life had been shaped by fear, the words “Rejoice!” would have sounded almost impossible. So Mary’s reaction makes perfect sense: “Mary was deeply troubled by these words and wondered what the angel’s greeting meant.”

And then the news becomes even more shocking: “You will conceive and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus—‘Deliverance.’” Would this have sounded like good news to Mary? Probably not. A pregnancy before marriage threatened her honor, her future, even her life. If you were Mary, could you rejoice?

And yet—after hearing everything Gabriel said—Mary responds, “Let it be done to me according to your word.” Mary chooses hope over despair. She is not joyful because her situation is easy. She is not joyful because everything is going her way. She chooses joy as an act of faith.

Mary’s “Let it be” is not passive submission. It is a profound decision of trust—a refusal to surrender to despair, a declaration that God’s promise is greater than her fear. This is what Willie James Jennings means when he says, “Joy is an act of resistance against despair.” Joy is not pretending things are fine. Joy is holding onto God’s promise even when the world gives you every reason to give up. Joy is stepping into God’s calling with courage, trusting that God will bring new life. Mary chose joy over despair, and her flame of joy has continued to grow and light the world.

### **Joni Eareckson Tada**

This kind of joy—joy as resistance—didn’t end with Mary. Many people in our time have lived this truth. One of them is Joni Eareckson Tada. At age 17, she dove into shallow water, broke her neck, and became a quadriplegic. She spent years battling depression, anger, and the feeling that her life was over.

But slowly—through faith, community, and perseverance—she discovered a different kind of joy. She learned to paint by holding a brush between her teeth. She began writing, speaking, and advocating for people with disabilities. She started an international ministry bringing wheelchairs and hope to children around the world.

Joni says: “Joy is not the absence of suffering, but the presence of God.” Like Mary, her life testifies that joy is not what happens after suffering is removed. Joy is what happens when we trust God inside our suffering. Joy is the resistance that keeps despair from winning.

### **Son of Mary**

Mary stands as a witness to the power of a faith that resists despair, and this courageous faith flowed directly into the one they call the Son of Mary. Wherever Jesus went, joy followed. He ate with people others avoided. He lifted up the poor, the sick, the forgotten. He proclaimed the kin-dom of God, and joy began to bloom in unexpected places. Why did Jesus stand so closely with the weak and the wounded? The simple answer is “because he was the Son of Mary.”

From Mary, he learned the way of courageous joy. From Mary, he learned compassion. From Mary, he learned how to turn sorrow into mercy and suffering into solidarity. From Mary, he learned the strength of hospitality and the hope that resists despair. Jesus was shaped by a mother who said “yes” to God in the midst of trauma. A mother who believed new life was still possible. A mother who chose joy.

### **Your Galilee**

So let me ask you gently: Where is your Galilee? Where is the place in your life marked by worry, wounds, or exhaustion? Where are you tempted to believe that nothing good can come?

Remember: The first announcement of joy came to Galilee—a land full of pain and scars. Immanuel, God-with-us, will meet you in your Galilee too. God will stand with you in the place where you struggle, just as God stood with Mary.

So let us choose joy—not despair. Let us trust the God who saves. And let us pray as Mary might have prayed: “God, this situation is not easy. But I will not give up. I will take one more step in faith. I will resist despair with joy today.” Through people who live like this—who choose joy as Mary did—God begins new history. And may the joy of joining God’s work be alive in each of you. Amen.