

Being Present with Joy
Isaiah 61: 1-4; 10, and Psalm 126: 1-3 Luke 1: 41-55

Happy Moments

2023 has almost come to an end and I hope that you have made many good memories this year. What are you grateful for? What are your most joyful memories of this year? I have had many grateful and happy moments. First, I visited Korea after 13 years since my last visit. I had a wonderful time there with my family and friends. I am also grateful that I didn't have many funerals this year. After Linda's funeral, three of you came to me and said, "I want you to do my funeral." So I said, "I am praying for your longevity so technically, I am praying against your wish." Your Pastor always prays for you but that doesn't mean that you will always get what you wish for. I hope you all stay healthy and well in the coming year and the next! Another happy moment was when Juhee received the call that she had passed her ordination interview. If you attend to the gifts of joy you have received from God this year, you will surely find many.

We tend to be grateful and joyful when things go well and the situation we are in is pleasant. Imagine that you are on an all-inclusive five-star cruise with your best friends. You are enjoying delicious food, nice shows, beautiful scenery of the coastline and wonderful conversations with your friends. No tension, no pressure, just relaxation and rest. Will you be happy? Yes. Then, can we be joyful even in the midst of struggle and difficulties? Today's scripture reading tells us how we can be present with joy no matter what.

Two Women

In the Gospel of Luke, we've read about two women. Both women are pregnant with significance because one woman carries the messenger, John the Baptist, and the other woman bears the message, Jesus Christ. Are they excited and joyful? Maybe, but I am not so sure.

Generally, having a baby in the womb is a blessing and joyful thing to celebrate, but because of the special and maybe challenging circumstances they faced, Elizabeth and Mary could not simply celebrate their pregnancies and be joyful. We don't know exactly how old Elizabeth was when she gave a birth to John the Baptist, but we know she was somewhat old to become a first-time mother. Even today, having children in later life is considered to be risky. We can easily imagine how dangerous it might be for Elizabeth to have a baby at her age. She could die in child-birth or have serious complications that could threaten her wellbeing. In this challenging situation, her joy may have smoldered with anxiety. How could she keep alive the small light of joy in her? She needed someone who could hold her hands and understand.

What about Mary? [ppt] We are so familiar with this image of Mary as faithful, gentle, all understanding, and a perfect mother that we often forget that she was only a teenage girl. Maybe she was only about thirteen or fourteen years old when she had Jesus. She heard from an angel that she would be pregnant and the baby would be called the Son of the Most High. That sounds great! The only problem was that the baby was not her fiancé's child and she could be stoned to death for this simple fact. It meant that she could not tell her mom or dad, or friends about what she had heard from the angel or about her pregnancy. How would she have felt? The situation she faced didn't look pleasant at all. Accepting God's calling does not magically remove all problems, fear, or anxiety. In this dangerous situation, Mary's joy might have smoldered with anxiety and fear. To keep alive her small light of joy, she needed someone who could hug and understand her.

In times of uncertainty and distress, a powerful antidote to fear and anxiety is companionship, especially with those who are in the same boat. Mary needed someone who would understand, and confirm her calling by God. Knowing that her relative Elizabeth in her old age had conceived a son by the power of Holy Spirit, Mary embarked on a trip to see her. It was about a 100-mile journey on foot. Mary may have walked 4 to 5 days to get there. We can only imagine the mix of emotions she must have felt during those days. Delight, fear, confusion, excitement, anxiety, all at the same time.

[ppt] But her fear and anxiety immediately turned to joy when she saw Elizabeth's joyful-smiling face! Also, Mary's presence was a great gift of joy for Elizabeth. "As soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why am I so favored, that the mother of the Messiah should come to me? The moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leaped for joy." Mary believed the child in her womb was a gift from God and Elizabeth's blessing confirmed Mary's belief and calling to be the mother of Jesus. Nothing had really changed yet but in her joy, Mary praised God. Elizabeth and Mary became the gift of joy for one another by deeply seeing one another and affirming what God was doing in their lives.

We can share the same gift of joy with one another. Age doesn't matter. We can be the gift of joy for one another. As you know, Juhee

passed her ordination interview. I often joke that she became a pastor because she didn't like to hear my preaching, but she found her calling through her inner struggle with infertility over many years. While praying and crying, Juhee happened to read James 1:27. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world." That was the moment of her calling to serve the least and the most vulnerable. Her calling was confirmed later, when I served my previous church, and a church member, Dell Marona, had to move to a nursing home. She was 88 years old and loved the home where she had lived for more than 50 years. All her memories resided there, but she had to leave and she struggled with a sense of loss and depression. Juhee wanted to help her with cleaning the house and console her as well. In their conversations, Juhee shared her sorrows, struggles and calling story rooted in infertility. Dell suddenly hastened towards Juhee, relying on her walker. She stretched her curved back and gazed at Juhee through her clear blue eyes, saying, "Juhee... I am your child. You already have many children at our church. When you go to another church, you will have many more of God's children." Juhee told me that she felt all the burdens she had carried for a decade vanish, and she unexpectedly received a clear affirmation of God's calling through Dell. She could not hold back her tears of joy. The situation hadn't changed but still there was overflowing joy in that moment. An 88 year old woman shared God's gift of joy with Juhee. I believe that we can share the same joy with one another by being fully present in that moment of being together and affirming the great gifts God has given to each one of us for God's great mission. Right?

Joy

Like the flu, joy is contagious. Of course, in a much better way! Dr. McFee wrote, "Joy is not the equivalent of happiness, but rather the deep conviction that we are called to be present in the work of bringing about "great things"—a better world for those who need it most." After hearing Elizabeth's blessing, Mary praised God. Mary's song here is known as the Magnificat. Mary's joy did not come from a pleasant situation or status of comfort. It came from her belief

and realization that God was about to do something great for our salvation and she was a part of it. Mary offered “the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say, the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung.” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer) which echoes the good news in Isaiah.

*The God has sent me to bring good news to those who are poor;
to heal broken hearts;
to proclaim release to those held captive
and liberation to those in prison;
to announce a year of favor from YHWH, and the day of God’s vindication;
to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to give them a wreath of flowers instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of tears, a cloak of praise instead of despair.*

In her song, Mary proclaims that the kin-dom of God is coming and her song and her life became the gift of joy for many people. I believe we can do the same, be present with joy and the gift of joy. During the week, think of places and people that need joy and be more present there with joy. Be the gift of contagious joy for them. Amen.