



ABOUT THE THEME

Advent is a season of waiting, but is idle waiting what God wants of us? In preparation for the coming Messiah, we wonder together—what things can't wait? What demands our immediate attention? What requires our work and preparation? What is it that God can't wait for? Is it our praise, reconciliation, and proclamation? Is it the end of suffering, isolation, and fear? This Advent, we are invited to join in imagining, prioritizing, and preparing. As we wait, what can't?

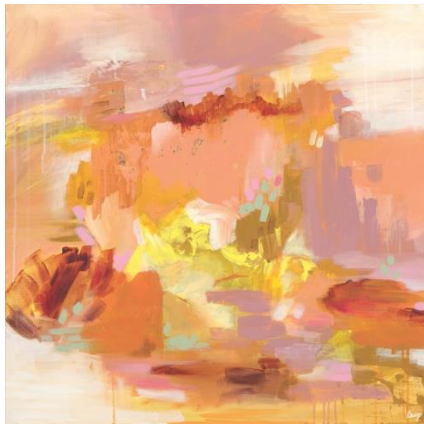
DECEMBER 15TH | 3RD SUNDAY OF ADVENT | DELIGHT (JOY) CAN'T WAIT | ISAIAH 35:1-10 & LUKE 1:46B-55

Mary's Magnificat shows us deep and holy joy—joy that trusts God's promises of restoration, new beginnings, food for the hungry, and justice for the wronged. In Isaiah, creation sings with abundant joy, blooming open like a crocus. What does it look like to delight in God's goodness? How do we respond to God's work in the world with joy? How can we be singers of joy?

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Isaiah 35:1-11 paints a vision of hope to those held captive in exile. This particular image of the desert blooming is not only hopeful, it is abundant and joyful. How does joy sustain those who are broken and trapped by fear?
- In her artist statement for the painting, "Desert Blooms," Lauren Wright Pittman describes the desert as a place "often associated with desolation, scarcity, and death, but it's really a place of surprising, subversive beauty—a place of meeting the divine." What does subversive joy look like in spaces that are scarce of hope or full of despair?

ARTIST'S STATEMENT | "DESERT BLOOMS" by Lauren Wright Pittman inspired by Isaiah 35:1-10 | acrylic on canvas



When I approached this piece, I read the first few verses of the passage until a phrase stuck in my head, "like the crocus [the desert] shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing" (Is. 35:2). I thought I might paint a study of a crocus flower—one zoomed in on the subtle shifts in shades of purple. However, when I began to roll the phrase around in my mind, I felt the need to paint the colors of the desert. The text says the desert blossoms "like a crocus" not "with crocuses." I almost missed the desert for the flowers. For me, flowers are evident metaphors for joy and a clear testament to God's magnificence. After all, Emerson wrote, "Earth laughs in flowers."** My initial instinct with this painting was to transform the desert with flowers, but instead, I think I needed to see the desert for what it is.

The desert is often associated with desolation, scarcity, and death, but it's really a place of surprising, subversive beauty—a place of meeting the Divine. I found myself grabbing paints I don't typically use—mauves, ochres, pale greens, and dusty pinks. My painting intuition doesn't often lead me to desert colors because I'm drawn to deeply saturated hues that I find more obviously beautiful. It takes a bit more effort to see the desert as a place of abundance and overflowing worship of our

Creator, but I think this intentional shift in seeing is part of what it means to prepare the way during Advent. What would it look like to delight in elements of creation that you often overlook? How can you help the parched places of your corner of the world blossom into new life?

**Ralph Waldo Emerson, from the poem, "Hamatreya."

ISAIAH 35:1-10 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

35 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus ² it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.

³ Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
"Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you."

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer,

and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

⁸ A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;

the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

⁹ No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.

¹⁰ And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

LUKE 1:39-55 New Revised Standard Version

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

⁴⁶And Mary 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."

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- Today's Luke passage is part of a longer story. Read Luke 1:5-66 (the births of John the Baptist and Jesus foretold, Mary's Magnificat, and the birth of John). Look for (or even underline) each instance in the text where fear or joy are present. Where in the interweaving birth stories of Jesus and John the Baptist are characters filled with surprising joy to overcome their fear?
- Why do you think Mary hurries to the Judean highlands to stay with Elizabeth for three months during her pregnancy? Does she leave to avoid public scrutiny? Is she in need of comfort and camaraderie from her elder relative who is also pregnant? Does she visit Elizabeth to see for herself what the angel promised (Luke 1:26-37)?

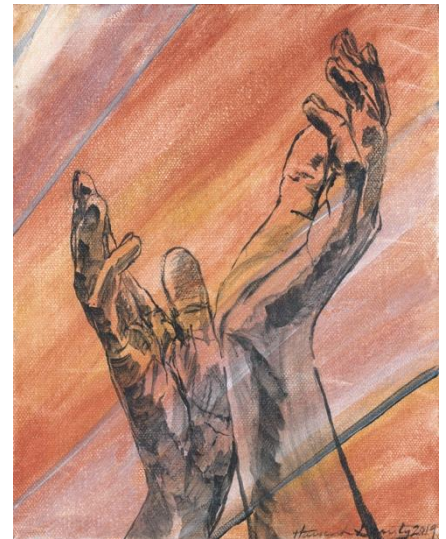
ARTIST'S STATEMENT | A DANCE by Hannah Garrity inspired by Luke 1:46b-55 | acrylic on canvas

Somehow, Mary is thankful. How is she doing that? How can she genuinely appreciate her situation? Her perspective amazes me.

Carrying a baby is difficult even in the best of circumstances. The physical and psychological weight grows quickly. Society changes its view of you, you change your view of yourself. Like Advent, it is a time of waiting. It is also a time of anticipation, dread, concern, excitement, pain, fear, and confusion.

Mary is carrying a child out of wedlock. Her fiancé is considering leaving her. She has nothing but her word to explain this circumstance to him, to her family, to her community. All of the typical and difficult pregnancy feelings must have been multiplied, yet Mary is thankful.

In this painting, I cast Mary's hands in a ballerina's dance. She reaches up in prayer, in praise. She reaches up to glorify our God. She reaches up in thanks for the most challenging thing she has possibly ever had to deal with. Should I be counting my challenges as well as my blessings? Should I be glorifying God for the pain in life as well as the joy? Perhaps, I should.



SOMETHING MORE TO CONSIDER

"'My soul magnifies the Lord,' Mary sings right there in Elizabeth's living room, 'and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.' Elizabeth and Zechariah are the first to hear her song, but it is not just for them. It is also for her, Mary, and for the Mighty One who has done great things for her. It is for Gabriel, who first gave her the good news, and for all who will benefit from it—for the proud and powerful who will be relieved of their swelled heads, for the hungry who will be filled with good things, for the rich who will be sent away empty so that they have room in them for more than money can buy. Her song is for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—for Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel—for every son and daughter of Israel who thought God had forgotten the promise to be with them forever, to love them forever, to give them fresh and endless life. It was all happening inside of Mary, and she was so sure of it that she was singing about it ahead of time—not in the future tense but in the past, as if the promise had already come true. Prophets almost never get their verb tenses straight, because part of their gift is being able to see the world as God sees it—not divided into things that are already over and things that have not happened yet, but as eternally unfolding mystery that surprises everyone—maybe even God."

—Brown Taylor, Barbara. "Singing Ahead of Time." *Home By Another Way*. Cambridge, Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999. 17-8.