

“Stubborn Joy”

A sermon based on Luke 1:46-55

Rev. Emily M. Brown

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On the third Sunday of each Advent, we light a candle of joy, and we shape our worship around the theme of joy. That is a challenge this year, and a challenge this week. We are holding in our hearts the deaths of loved ones, layered onto the grief and worry of living through a pandemic. The world feels weightier than normal, and it may seem a tall order to rejoice. And that is ok. If the theme of joy does not resonate for you this week, please know that you are loved just as you are, just where you are, that our God is big enough.

But I am reminded this week that the joy God invites us to is not only a joy that accompanies ease and good fortune. The joy to which we are invited is a joy that shines through the deepest night and burbles up from the ground and grows up like a shoot from an old dead stump. The story of the people of faith is a story of God’s faithfulness in adversity. It is a story of trusting in God and rejoicing in the Lord even when all seems lost.

Our art on the bulletin cover, the scripture it is based on, and the statement of artist Lauren Wright Pittman speak to that. We heard today Mary’s Magnificat – her song of joy and praise that she sings in the midst of her pregnancy, during her visit to her cousin Elizabeth. Her song dreams of the world she is calling on God to bring about: a world where justice is done, where the poor are fed and the lowly are lifted up. In our Advent study last Wednesday, we noticed that some of our strongest and clearest images of Mary are as Jesus prepares to enter the world, and as his earthly life ends. We know her as a mother, but we see her motherhood most clearly as an expectant mother, and as a grieving mother. We are confident that what came between was full of the joyful mundanity of family life. But in scripture and in art, we see her through the brackets that enclose her parenthood – the expectant Mary of the annunciation and the visitation, the new mother of the Nativity, and then the heart-broken Mary at the foot of the cross, or in art, we see images of the Pietà, cradling the body of her son.

In her statement on the featured artwork today, Lauren Wright Pittman writes that she was inspired by a piece of art featured on the cover of *Time* magazine last summer. That piece, titled “Analogous Colors,” responded to the death of George Floyd, and showed a black mother holding a baby, but while the mother was shown in full color and detail, the baby was left blank, an empty silhouette. Inspired by that image, Lauren Wright Pittman painted “Contours of Mary’s Dream.” Mary is portrayed as a black mother, holding her arms as if cradling a baby, but her arms appear empty; we see a halo where the infant Christ should lay. Pittman describes the image as “Mary holding the contours of her dreams for the world, while also holding the contour of her loss.” She notes that Mary’s Magnificat becomes especially poignant as we reflect on the ways that Jesus was abused by the powerful. “Mary’s song reverberates for all mothers who have had dreams for their children shattered by senseless violence,” she writes.



This painting also draws a parallel between the Word becoming flesh within Mary's own body, and the Word present at creation – if you have the painting in front of you, look carefully at Mary's hair. Pittman writes, "I collaged macro photography of patterns, textures, and colors from Creation—such as sunsets, bird's feathers, fish scales, galaxies, leaves, planets, fur, water, etc.—and wove them into her hair. Jesus, the thread of Creation, is being knit together in her womb. God's dream for all Creation is materializing as cells divide in her body; all the while she sings of a dream, still unrealized." Mary's song dreams of a world made right. It is a song of joy that persists in spite of the world's pain, crying out acclamation for a God who is still dreaming up the best for us. It is a song of stubborn joy.

In the essay "Joy as Resistance," Rev. Emily C. Heath writes, "Here's what I think. I think it's easy to be joyless in this world. It's simple. It doesn't take much effort. You can put others down. You can dwell in hopelessness. You can even lob out negative comments on the internet from the comfort of your own home. The best part is that if you lack joy, you don't even have to do anything constructive. You can just dwell in it. But it is a whole lot harder to rejoice. Why? Because joy is hard. Now that may sound like an oxymoron. Joy is joy. Shouldn't joy be easy? I don't think so. Because I think joy is something deeper than that. But that also means that it's rooted. And it's the thing that remains in you even when everything else around you is crumbling

down. It has been said by many, in many different ways, that joy is resistance. That is especially true in the worst of days.”

If you find that the well of joy is running dry for you today, that is ok. I will not tell you how you should feel. And we trust that God’s salvation is not dependent on our doing the right deeds, saying the right words, or feeling the right feelings. But I will offer you an invitation: an invitation to seek joy, to nurture joy, to cultivate joy, not just when it is easy, but also when it is hard. Stubborn joy – the joy that Mary gives voice to – is an act of faith, proclaiming that there is good in the world, good in God, even amid challenge and turmoil. Stubborn joy clings to God’s promises, God’s dreams, of a world made right. So may you find joy today. And if you cannot find joy, then may joy find you.

Amen.