

**Summary:**

“Make the Blessings Known: Unabashed Joy,” the third in our series “Heaven and Nature Sing,” by Rev. Jay Anderson at Church of the Master United Methodist, Westerville, OH, Sunday, December 15, 2019

**Detail:**

My favorite hymn of Advent/Christmas is “In the Bleak Midwinter.” Like the season it describes, the song is often thought of as dark, even brooding or haunting.

When we think of “joyful” Christmas songs, “In the Bleak Midwinter” probably isn’t the first to pop into your minds - there are many songs of the season that are more upbeat, more popular, more joy-filled:

- “Angels from the Realm of Glory”
- “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing”
- “Joy to the World”
- Even “Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer” is more joyful **sounding** than “In the Bleak Midwinter.”

But as I began studying our scriptures for today, considering what the prophet Isaiah had to say, thinking about Mary’s response to her encounter with the angel, and looking at the context of these passages, though, this is the song that came to my mind.

If you think “In the Bleak Midwinter” is dark, then you should read chapter 34 of Isaiah, the chapter immediately preceding chapter 35 that we read from today. Here’s a sampling...

*Draw near, you nations, to hear;*

*and listen, you peoples.  
Hear, earth and all who fill it,  
world and all its offspring.  
The Lord rages against all the nations,  
and is angry with all their armies.  
God is about to wipe them out  
and has prepared them for slaughter.  
Their dead will be cast out,  
the stench of their corpses will rise,  
and the mountains will melt from their blood.  
All the stars of heaven will dissolve,  
the skies will roll up like a scroll,  
and all the stars will fall,  
like a leaf withering from a vine,  
like fruit from a fig tree. (Isaiah 34:1-4, CEB)*

**Stephen King novels aren't as dark and frightening as this! Compared to Isaiah 34, "In the Bleak Midwinter" is downright giddy!**

*In the bleak mid-winter  
Frosty wind made moan;  
Earth stood hard as iron,  
Water like a stone;  
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,  
Snow on snow,  
In the bleak mid-winter  
Long ago.*

**Moving to our chapter for today, Isaiah 35, it's like switching channels from a "Friday the 13th" movie to "The Brady Bunch."**

*"The desert and the dry land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom like the crocus.*

*They will burst into bloom,*

*and rejoice with joy and singing.*

*They will receive the glory of Lebanon,*

*the splendor of Carmel and Sharon.*

*They will see the Lord's glory,*

*the splendor of our God.*

“Holy whiplash, Batman!” Where did THIS come from? Well, without boring you with minute details of biblical scholarship and literary analysis, it came from the future. Not in the way I’ve described proleptic theology the last couple of weeks, a vision of the already present and completed reign of God in the future toward which God is pulling us, but literally from the immediate future, about two hundred years after Isaiah 34 was written.

Chapter 35 was plunked down into this place in the book by a later editor who, having read about Isaiah’s idea of a “bleak midwinter,” apparently thought “these people need a break! They need to see that all is not totally lost - that there is a way out of this mess!” So in the midst of the doom and gloom of chapter 34, we’re given a vision, a message of joy, unabashed joy, in chapter 35.

*Then the eyes of [those who cannot see] will be opened,*

*and the ears of [those who cannot hear] will be cleared.*

*Then [those who cannot move] will leap like the deer,*

*and the tongue of [those who cannot make a sound] will sing.*

*Waters will spring up in the desert,*

*and streams in the wilderness.*

*The burning sand will become a pool,*

*and the thirsty ground, fountains of water.*

Chapter 34 warns of the coming exile of the people of Judah and later Israel who have turned away from God, have stopped living according to God's commandments, and have moved so far away from God's vision for them that the only way to get back on track is to start over. God's protective hand will simply pull back, allowing the consequences of their actions to come to bear.

God loves them, but will not cover for them any more. There are consequences to their actions, and they're about to feel them. But the writer of Isaiah wants them to know that there will be a way back...that there is hope - there is always hope - eventually.

When the Israelite people were first being led out of Egypt by Moses, they too, fell away from the way of God. That's why Moses gave them the "Gilligan's Island" tour of the middle east - 40 years to complete what should have been a three month journey.

Those who turned on God right out of the gate would not see the Promised Land, only their children would. Centuries later the same kind of thing happens - those who are sent into exile will, for the most part, not be the ones who return, it will be their descendants.

But there **will** be a return, there **will** be a way back. There is **hope**, as distant as it might seem, there is hope.

*A highway will be there.*

*It will be called The Holy Way.*

*The unclean won't travel on it,*

*but it will be for those walking on that way.*

*Even fools won't get lost on it;*

*no lion will be there,*

*and no predator will go up on it.*

*None of these will be there;*

*only the redeemed will walk on it.*

*The Lord's ransomed ones will return and enter Zion with singing,*

*with everlasting joy upon their heads.*

*Happiness and joy will overwhelm them;*

*grief and groaning will flee away."*

Last week, at the end of our message, I asked you to consider "what would be our refrain? What would be the song that we would sing to all the world, that would repeat the sounding joy?"

How do we lift our voices in praise and thanksgiving when so much of our lives seem worthy of lament and intercession? Our scripture readings for this morning help show us the way.

Isaiah 35 speaks words of comfort and promise in the midst of war and desolation, while chapter 34 offers a terrifying vision of God's wrath against the nations, and chapter 36 describes equally dire warnings for Jerusalem. In between wrath and warnings, Isaiah writes about a chorus of creation saying to one another, "Be strong. Do not fear. Here is your God." As theologian Rev. Barbara Lundblad puts it, "Isaiah dares to speak a word out of place. A word that refused to wait until things improved." It's a word of Unabashed Joy.

Our Gospel passage from Luke, the Song of Mary, or what is called her Magnificat, meaning "to magnify," strikes a similar tone. Mary, pregnant and unmarried, is in a world of trouble, whether she realizes it or not. Joseph would be well within his rights to not only end their relationship and leave her on her own, but to have her stoned to death.

In the book we're using for our Advent Study, April Casperson points out that in the middle of the angel's pronouncement to Mary about what God wants to do through her, Mary stops, she pauses, and she asks "clarifying questions" of the angel. We have to think that she felt fear, insecurity, ineptitude - she's a fourteen or fifteen year old girl - who wouldn't be afraid.

I can't imagine that she just turned in the moment, and told the angel, "Okay, sure, that's fine."

Luke doesn't tell us how long this process took, but I have to imagine Mary needed a little bit of time to think about all of this before responding. And yet, when she does, she sings out with unabashed joy: God is great! God has done and will do great things! Holy is our God!

*I'm bursting with God-news; Mary proclaims.*

*I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.*

*God took one good look at me, and look what happened—*

*I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!*

*What God has done for me will never be forgotten,*

*the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.*

It takes courage and love to sing songs of joy in the midst of difficulty, of loss, of pain or great suffering. Unabashed joy is different than being told in the midst of your suffering that, "God doesn't give you more than you can handle." - a phrase that Rev. Adam Hamilton, in his book, "Half Truths," says is a misinterpretation of what the Bible really says. Such words of seeming joy can come across as hollow or brash. How do we know the difference? How do we speak joy into places of suffering so that it honors the depth of human feelings and

the all encompassing love of God? The God about whom the song says...

Our God, heaven cannot hold Him

Nor earth sustain,

Heaven and earth shall flee away

When He comes to reign:

In the bleak mid-winter

A stable-place sufficed

The Lord God Almighty —

Jesus Christ.

We speak joy into these situations by remembering first, that God came to be with us in the middle of these difficult times. God is embodied in this child that Mary will bring into the world - a world that is dark and dangerous. In fact, both Isaiah and Mary speak of a particular and embodied joy: seeing eyes, hearing ears, gushing waters, growing seeds, the hungry filled, the humble lifted.

They also speak of a particular and embodied suffering: feeble hands, fearful hearts, people scattered and brought down.

As Lundblad notes,

“Isaiah dares to speak a word out of place.

A word that refused to wait until things improved.

As Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Bruggemann has reminded us, 'Israel's doxologies are characteristically against the data. We see and hear the data every night on the news and every morning on the front page of the paper. Add to that the data of our own lives: waiting for the test results from the doctor, mourning the death of a loved one, wondering if we'll make it through the next round of lay-offs. We know the data all too well and we long for a word out of place.'"

At the same time, Mary sings in her song about the God who saves not just souls, but embodied people.

The God she celebrates is not content merely to point people toward heaven; God's redemptive work begins here on earth.

God fills the hungry not only with hope, but with food. Rather than being satisfied with comforting the lowly, the God Mary describes lifts them up, granting them dignity and honor, a seat at the table; a voice in the conversation. God shows strength by disrupting the world's power structures, dethroning rulers, and humbling the mighty.

She sings...

*[God's] mercy flows in wave after wave  
on those who are in awe before him.*

*[God] bared [an] arm and showed... strength,  
scattered the bluffing braggarts.*

*[God] knocked tyrants off their high horses,  
pulled victims out of the mud.*

*The starving poor sat down to a banquet;  
the callous rich were left out in the cold.*

Commentator Judith Jones offers that,

“Clearly such saving acts are good news for the poor and lowly, but what does Mary’s song mean for the wealthy and the powerful? Is there nothing but judgment for them? Though judgment and salvation may seem like opposites, they go hand in hand. Those who stand in awe only of *themselves* and *their own* power will be judged. Yet if the wealthy and powerful can only see it by bringing them down - by emptying and humbling them - God is saving them. When they turn their gaze from themselves and their own accomplishments, when their awe is directed to God - then there’s mercy for them, too.”

None of us like to think of ourselves as being among the rich and the powerful, there is always someone with more money, more stuff, more power than we have.

But in the view from the bottom, these words are directed to us as much as anyone else.

Jones writes,

“Both in Mary’s song and in Jesus’ ministry we see the God who *loves* us as we are but does not *leave* us as we are. Zacchaeus, for example, shows us God’s saving love in action. As a tax collector, Zacchaeus is wealthy, but he is also a scorned outsider. When Jesus invites himself to dinner at Zacchaeus’s house, the encounter leaves Zacchaeus welcomed into community, emptied of his wealth, and profoundly changed. His gaze is redirected from himself toward Jesus. He no longer sees only his own needs and desires. Now he sees those whom he has harmed in his quest for money and security. Jesus brings Zacchaeus down from his wealth and up from his shame.

In the process he frees him. Salvation has come to his house (Luke 19:9).

“When God empties the rich of their excess and fills the hungry with good things, the result is not a social reversal - with the powerless and the powerful changing places - as much as it is social leveling. The rich and well-positioned are stripped of, perhaps saved from their arrogance and taught to love their neighbors as they love themselves. Thus God provides for the poor and honors the humiliated. When the arrogant are scattered and the powerful brought down, then every person has access to enough of the world’s resources, and no one has too much. Every person is treated with dignity and respect, and no one uses power to harm.”

This is a hard message for some to hear.

We remember the adult Jesus when he is approached by a rich young man who asks him what he must do to receive eternal life.

Jesus tells him first to follow the commandments, to love God and love his neighbor, to which he replies that he has done that since he was a child.

And scripture says, in that moment, that Jesus loved him. And then he tells the young man to sell all that he has and give it to the poor, and then to come and follow him. The passage ends by telling us that the man went away sad and distressed, because he owned many possessions. And we must wonder if, in fact, it wasn’t his possessions that owned him.

We like to think if we just get through the difficult decisions we have to make or the times of suffering that we from time to time must

endure, that joy will come: first comes suffering and then we progress to a joyful state of being. But the truth is, these deep feelings get tangled up together.

We can go from one to another, back and forth, or feel them all at the same time. The psalmist reminds us...

*Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones,*

*and give thanks to [God's] holy name.*

*For [God's] anger is but for a moment;*

*[God's] favor is for a lifetime.*

*Weeping may linger for the night,*

*but joy comes with the morning. (Psalm 30:4b-5)*

The good news for today is that we can feel all these things, including suffering, and still joyfully proclaim a day when, “Gladness and joy will overtake [us] and sorrow and sighing will flee away.”

After the long dark night of the soul, joy comes in the morning.

So in the midst of all that you may be feeling or experiencing in this Holiday season, with all the pressures, the stresses, the demands on your time, your patience, and your wallet, remember that it's by placing our trust and our hope in the Christ child, the embodied love and peace of God, that we find unabashed joy.

We need only follow where the song leads:

What can I give Him,

Poor as I am? —

If I were a Shepherd

I would bring a lamb;

If I were a Wise Man

I would do my part, —

Yet what I can I give Him, —

Give my heart.