

1. Introduction

Usually the third week of Advent is Joy Sunday — and it's often associated with Mary.

Which I love.

Because right in the middle of the Christmas narrative,
tucked between angel visits and census travel and stable stories,
we get a song.

Mary's song.

The Magnificat.

And yet it's not the Christmas carol we usually sing.

We know "Jingle Bells,"
we know "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town,"
we even know "*Mary, Did You Know?*"
(which, by the way, if people actually listened to Mary's song, they'd know — yes, she
knew. But I digress.)

Mary sings a song most of us skip over —
but it is an incredibly revolutionary part of the Christmas story.

If you don't pass over it too quickly and jump to the birth narrative...this song isn't

just any song. It is more than a song expressing Mary's praise... It is a song crying out that a revolution is happening inside of her and in the world. Her soul magnifies the Lord, her spirit, her very breath rejoices in God her Savior. This is the first time the Greek word for Savior is used in Luke. It is Mary that first proclaims the baby growing inside her will be the Savior. So she knew.

In song Mary moves from the deeply personal to the political in the second verse. See she isn't just singing a song about what God is doing in her...she is singing about the revolution that is happening in the world. She sings a song that proclaims what the coming of God's kingdom will mean for the world.

Maybe because when you experience God growing within you...you realize that it's not just about you, it is about the world.

I. JOY VS. HAPPINESS — Clearing the Ground

Most of us are pretty sure we know what happiness is — especially this time of year.

It looks like twinkle lights and warm kitchens.

It sounds like laughter and familiar songs.

It feels like things finally going the way we hoped they would.

In other words...

what we usually mean is *happiness*.

Happiness is responsive.

It rises when circumstances are good and fades when they aren't.

At our house, we talk about emotions - and the learning to identify them with our kids

Sad is when someone takes your toy.

Sad is when something you were really looking forward to doesn't happen.

Happy is ice cream after dinner.

Happy is dancing in the living room.

Happy is when things feel fun and light and easy.

And happiness is good.

It's not something to dismiss.

But it's also fragile.

Because the moment circumstances shift —
the moment life gets complicated or painful —
happiness can disappear just as quickly as it arrived.

Joy is different.

Joy is not a reaction to what's happening around us.

Joy is a capacity that grows within us.

Joy is a way of being present to the world that is rooted in something deeper —
something larger than the moment —
something anchored in God.

Joy doesn't wait for conditions to improve.

Joy doesn't require certainty or comfort.

Joy takes shape in the life we actually have —
not the life we wish we had,
not the life we thought we were supposed to have.

Joy doesn't erase struggle.

It doesn't deny grief or fear or disappointment.

Joy is the quiet, steady awareness
that even here —
especially here —
God is present.

Joy is not pretending everything is fine.

Joy is refusing to numb ourselves to the beauty that still exists,
right alongside what is broken.

Joy is not “I’ll be happy when...”

Joy is the courageous recognition:

“God is here — even now.”

II. MARY'S EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES DO NOT WARRANT HAPPINESS

If joy were simply a reaction to favorable conditions,

Mary would be the last person in scripture to sing.

Her circumstances do not add up to happiness.

We tend to paint Mary in soft pastels —

calm, serene, glowing in candlelight —

but that version of Mary exists only on Christmas cards.

The real Mary lives in a world far from peaceful or predictable.

She is:

young — likely 13 or 14

poor — from a family with no power or wealth

female — with almost no social or legal protection

unwed and pregnant — exposed to judgment, shame, even danger

living under Roman occupation — an empire that extracts, exploits, and terrorizes

without control over her future — her body, her reputation, her safety

Everything about Mary's situation is precarious.

She is a girl in a world that does not value girls.

She is pregnant in a world that can punish her for it.

She is poor in a world where poverty is a trap, not an inconvenience.

She is oppressed in a world where the powerful go unchallenged.

All the external measures by which we tend to assess —

comfort, certainty, financial security, social acceptance, safety, ease —

Mary has none of them.

If joy were dependent on happiness,

I'm not sure this is what Mary's song would sound like.

By all measures of human logic,

Mary should feel overwhelmed, anxious, ashamed, even afraid.

And yet...

in the middle of all of this,

she sings.

Not because her circumstances are ideal.

Not because the path ahead is simple.

Not because she trusts the vision for how everything will turn out.

Mary is not joyful because her life is easy.

Mary is joyful because God has entered the life she already has.

And that is where joy always begins.

Ok - let's also be real. I hate the cliches that the church is really great at dishing out.

"Just make room for God in your life" and then you'll feel joy. Just have joy.

III. RADICAL ACCEPTANCE — MAKING ROOM INSIDE REALITY

Now — I don't know exactly what Mary did internally to access joy in such circumstances, but I want to suggest one possibility.

Have you ever heard of radical acceptance?

It's a therapeutic concept, yes —
but long before it was a therapy term,
It was a spiritual practice.

Radical acceptance is the courageous willingness
to acknowledge reality as it is —
without illusion,
without denial,
without resistance —
so we can respond to it, rather than be crushed by it.

Radical acceptance does not mean approval.

It does not mean resignation.

It does not mean “I’m fine with this.”

It simply means we stop fighting the fact

that this is our reality right now.

Most of our suffering does not come from what is,

but from our resistance to what is:

“This shouldn’t be happening.”

“ This isn’t fair.”

“ I can’t handle this.”

“ I don’t want this to be true.”

When we wrestle reality, we exhaust ourselves.

When we accept reality, we free ourselves.

Radical acceptance creates room —

room for wisdom, room for clarity, room for God.

And here’s what I think Mary does:

She embraces the reality of her life —
out of order, unexpected, uncertain —
and she does not get stuck in resistance.

Once she stops fighting her reality,
her imagination opens
and joy rushes in.

She does not deny what is hard.

She lets joy rise within what is hard and unknown.

Internal Joy is the practice of presence and gratitude — learning to say yes to what is,
and to feel beauty without guilt.

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Have you ever experienced something really tragic — the loss of someone you love —
and noticed how moments of joy and sacredness still slip in, almost uninvited,
right alongside the tears?

I once mentored a youth whose father died while she was in high school.

Her grief was deep and long.

And as time went on, she said something that stayed with me.

She said she felt guilty when she started to feel happy again

“If I laugh...

if I feel happy...

if life feels good again —

does that mean I love him less?”

Learning to say yes to what is —

to let joy exist without guilt —

that is radical acceptance.

It's not betrayal.

It's not forgetting.

It's courage.

Joy doesn't say, “Everything is fine.”

Joy says, “God is here — even now.”

Joy is not waiting for a different reality.

Joy is making room for God in the reality we have.

Joy is letting ourselves be here —

in this moment —

and still saying yes to life.

That kind of joy is not fragile.

It's brave.

And here's what's important:

Joy never stays private for long.

Notice what Mary does next.

She could have kept her joy quiet.

She could have posted something vague about feeling blessed.

She could have stayed focused on baby snuggles and nursery plans.

Instead, she sings.

And she doesn't just sing about what God is doing *in her*.

She sings about what God is doing *in the world*.

She sings about power being overturned.

About the hungry being filled.

About the lowly being lifted up.

Because when God begins to grow inside you,

you realize it's never just about you.

Empires are perfectly fine with private joy —

joy that soothes individuals but never gathers people.

Mary's song is dangerous though. Her joy is a political threat to the empire.

And perhaps that is why we don't sing Mary's song...

Because communal joy breaks isolation.

It reminds people they belong.

It broadens their imagination.

It interrupts fear.

Empires rely on fear, despair, hopelessness, and scarcity —

because hopeless people don't resist.

Empire shrinks the world.

Joy widens it.

But Mary's joy is not sentimental. It is prophetic- About what the coming savior means for the world. And for the poor, the marginalized, those without power, the people focused on justice. This vision of what God is doing - this trust - is what leads a young pregnant mom out of wedlock to sing with joy. And invites others to join in.

So how do we practice and tap into communal joy? **Communal Joy:** the collective practice of celebration — art, music, storytelling, and solidarity that remind us who we are and whose we are.

As Christmas approaches, the lists grow long.

The gatherings multiply.

So do the germs and the exhaustion.

In all the commotion, this is the invitation:

Make room for joy.

Make room for music.

Make room for art.

Make room for laughter.

Make room for shared delight.

Because every time we do, we are saying:

“Empire cannot have my hope.”

“Fear cannot have my imagination.”

“Despair cannot have the final word.”

“God is here — even now.”