

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Third Sunday of Advent (Year C) — Guadete Sunday — 14 December 2025

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*Isaiah 35.1-10; Song of Mary (APBA, p. 31); James 5.7-10; Matthew 11.2-11.*

Today as we have lit the hope, the peace, and now the joy candle, I would like to focus on two of the texts we have heard this morning. The first one is the Song of Mary, or the Magnificat, which we have said together as the Psalm. The Song of Mary is found in the Gospel of Luke, in the infancy narrative of Christ.

Has anyone noticed that Luke has a flair for drama and the absurd? In Mark's gospel, there is no dallying around with the birth of the Messiah, we just get straight to the point with John the Baptist preparing the way of the Lord in the wilderness. Over in Matthew, we hear of the genealogy of Christ first, followed by the quiet faithfulness of Joseph to God's messenger and to the pregnant Mary. (And I'm just going to leave John's Gospel in the corner for the purposes of today's sermon.)

Here in Luke's Gospel, we have a dramatic infancy narrative unfolding before us. Before we even get a hint of Jesus, we have our supporting cast - the elderly priest Zechariah is sprung in the sanctuary of the Lord by an angel who announces his elderly wife Elizabeth will bear him a son. And he is subsequently struck mute as he questions the angel in his bewilderment!

This is but a prelude to the main cast—the same angel Gabriel, announces even more absurd news to Mary—that she will miraculously conceive a son, and not just any son, but the son of God—a child who “will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end!”

Now, my favourite part: Mary visits Elizabeth, and we have this scene centred on these two, beautiful, faithful women of God, together in the same house. By our way of understanding of the world, these two have no logical business being pregnant right now. Nonetheless, when Mary arrives in the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Elizabeth's child starts *leaping* for joy in her womb!

At this point, the miraculous, bewildering, absurd joy that has been building up in this story overflows, as our heroine Mary quite literally bursts into a musical number—the very same Song of Mary we have recited together this morning. According to Luke, the most faithful response of God's people to the revelation of the coming of Christ is joy—embodied in the narrative by song. In her song, Mary sings of her spirit rejoicing, all in response to God's covenantal promise to God's people, embodied in her in the most miraculous way.

Luke does not shy away in his Gospel of the appropriate response to the coming of Christ. The coming of Christ brings hope and peace, and his people respond in joyous praise. Not 11 verses after Mary's song, Zechariah bursts into song upon the naming of his son John! Then the angels appear to the shepherds, singing of the birth of the

Messiah. God's servant Simeon, upon seeing the child Christ, bursts forth in prophetic praise of God. Even at the end of Luke's Gospel, on that road to Emmaus, Jesus disciples walk with the risen Christ, and are unable to contain their wonder and awe when they realised Christ's presence among them as they say to each other "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking with us on the road?"

But what happens for us when we're not feeling joyful? When we are not really bursting at the seams in joyous abandon? While the gospels are infused throughout with joy, there are moments where it is less obvious. Which brings us to the second text from today's readings.

In the Gospel reading from Matthew 11, we yet again we encounter John the Baptist—this time, he is no longer a leaping child in his mother's womb. Rather, he is a man isolated and languishing in prison. It's a sharp contrast to the child conceived by absurd joy. Yet in this place of hopelessness and despair, the news of Christ in the world still reaches him. John's question back to Christ from the depths of prison is heady with prophecy:

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus' response echoes the Song of Mary: 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." It wouldn't feel out of place to hear that they are singing from the rooftops and dancing in the street! Even though John is in jail and he cannot see what Christ is doing, it is still happening. Joy still bursts forth.

In reflecting on a joy that 'bursts forth' I want to be very certain here to say that this idea is not a blanket wellness statement of "just focus on your own happiness" Or worse, "you can't control it, so don't worry about it." A practice of joy is not a saccharine happiness, or having little treats because you deserve it. Joy does not dismiss the very real hurt, pain, and grief of this world. Joy does not sweep these things under the rug. It's not a band aid solution. It's not turning off the TV, and ignoring the pain until it is no longer your problem.

Instead: Joy stands in defiance of the oppression of the world and of the corruption of sin. Joy is in the knowing that these things have been overcome in the incarnation, the death, and the resurrection of Christ. It is the hope and knowledge that these things are not the end, and that Christ has made and is making all things new. Joy is Mary and Elizabeth, two women who should by no logic be pregnant, singing to one another. And joy is the imprisoned prophet, having heard that his Messiah has arrived.

Living in Christ's joy is not the denial of the pain and injustice of the world. But it is the denial that they have power, that death is the end, that pain, grief, suffering - is all there is. Even in these moments of bleakness, whatever it may be that makes it harder for us to rejoice—the kingdom of God still breaks through. Joy still bursts forth.

Reading Luke's infancy narrative as if it were a Broadway musical brings me a lot of joy. And I hope this perspective has brought a new light to this story today. However, this is still a very serious joy, Joy happens in the hard times—we can still rejoice even in deep adversity because we know the end of the story—we know that the cross, that death is not the end. Our joy is deeply entrenched in hope and in peace.

In the Gospel of Luke, after Mary's song, we hear of the birth of John. As he is born, his father Zechariah, gives him a blessing. True to form, he bursts into song. There is hope. There is peace. There is joy. Yet there is not a denial of suffering, which, prophetically, we know will come to John in his ministry. But Zechariah offers this final blessing, this final benediction, which I offer to you today:

“By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”