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"Sweet Hymns of Joy"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
on December 10, 2023, from Luke 1:39-55*

It is now commonly accepted that the first radio broadcast in history happened on Christmas Eve night 1906, when Canadian inventor, Reginald Fessenden, used an alternator-transmitter he'd developed to beam a short program of music from Brant Rock, MA for an audience of shipboard radio operators working along the Atlantic Ocean. The program had been well publicized in advance, and was heard as far down as Norfolk, VA. It almost went off without a hitch. Fessenden began with a short introduction followed by Handel's *Largo* on phonograph. However, immediately before his assistant was supposed to speak, he was gripped with nervousness and froze. But with great presence of mind, Fessenden came to the rescue. He picked up his violin and began playing *O Holy Night*.

The famous hymn written by two French socialists, Placide Cappeau and Adolphe Adam, was adapted to English in 1855 and became a popular in the Northern United States, because of the third verse which proclaims, "Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother, and in his name all oppression shall cease." The words resonated with abolitionists and led to the tradition of singing the hymn in church on Christmas Eve. You may have noticed all my sermon titles this season of Advent have come from the lyrics of *O Holy Night*, "A Thrill of Hope," "His Gospel is Peace," and "Sweet Hymns of Joy." In fact, our theme for Advent derives from this song as well, "How does a weary world rejoice?"

If there ever was a year to ask that question, this is the year. Weary does not even begin to describe what we are feeling—exhausted, fatigued, drained, bushed, worn out, running on empty, burned up on both ends. My grandfather owned a horse farm, so over the years my family developed their own phrase for being tired. They'd say, "I've been rode hard and put away wet." I've tried to tell my family they can't use that unless people know you're talking about horses, but they don't seem to understand. We are weary people living in a weary world. And as I read the news and look at all the war and violence going on in our cities and our world, the crisis we've created, Christian Nationalism that seems to dominate our politics, and a presidential election right around the corner, from where I'm sitting, it feels like there's not going to be any rest for the weary.



We're almost at the end of 2023 and the things that have been making us weary all year long look like they're still going to be here again in 2024. Patriarchy will still be here in '24, racism will be here in '24, homophobia will be here in '24, poverty will be here in '24, ableism will be here in '24, oppression will be here in '24, mass incarceration will be here in '24, Moms of Liberty will be here in '24, gun violence will be here in '24, environmental catastrophe will be here in '24, the Supreme Court will be here in '24, the House of Representatives will be here in '24, war in Russia and Ukraine, Palestine and Israel will be here in '24. Lust for power and greed will be here in '24. Consumerism, individualism, and isolation will be here in '24. A housing and health care crisis will be here in '24. Unprecedented wealth inequality will be here in '24. Hatred, pettiness, apathy, and indifference will still be here in '24. And I'm tired of it! I'm weary. And if I'm tired, then you know people at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression are tired. Like Fannie Lou Hamer said, so many folks in our community are "sick and tired of being sick and tired."

Maybe the question is not "How does a weary world rejoice?" but "Can a weary world rejoice?" Can weary people living in a weary world find joy? Well, our story today from the gospel of Luke described the encounter of two weary women who were living in a weary world—a patriarchal world. And Roman political and military rule over Israel had not only compounded economic exploitation but intensified patriarchal domination. Authorities responsible for maintaining the boundaries of society had sharpened and intensified their concern with the ordinances governing the proper behavior of women for the sake of social control. In the first century world, women found themselves on the lowest rung of the social ladder, and therefore received the brunt of pressures passed down the chain of oppression. Jewish men, who were experiencing daily humiliation under the effects of Roman rule, would have passed down their anger to the women in their lives in violent and demeaning ways. As it happens in oppressed communities, the violence men experience from the daily humiliations of oppression tends to turn in on itself toward the people they're closest to who are the most vulnerable, women.

It was exhausting to be a woman living in the first century. Compounding the weariness that comes from living as a woman in a patriarchal world, Elizabeth was "getting on in years" according to her husband Zechariah. His astonished response to the angel Gabriel's was concern about their advanced age. Like Sarah and Abraham before them, they'd likely grown tired of trying to conceive, tired of praying for a miracle, tired of answering questions from family about why they didn't have children, tired of arguing hearing about why God hadn't "blessed them," tired of carrying around an unfulfilled longing in a world that expected women to have children and demeaned them if they didn't. Elizabeth was tired, weary, and exhausted.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Mary, on the other hand, was tired for a different reason. She was tired of being poor, tired of being a peasant, tired of living like a slave in an occupied land, tired of eking out a living in a sparse land, tired of surviving hand to mouth, tired of struggling to get by, tired of the anxiety of not knowing where her next meal was going to come from, tired of not having enough nourishment to sustain her. And because our story begins with Mary taking a 100-mile journey on foot while pregnant to see Elizabeth in the hill country of Judea, we know that Mary was also bone-tired from her travels, stumbling through the door with her luggage, ready to pass out on the floor. We all know what it feels like to be that tired—to be mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically weary. There's a sound that comes out of our bodies when we're that tired—and "umph" or "ooof." It's a groan of exhaustion. Some call it "the sigh of the weary" like in the famous folk tune, "Hard Times Come Again No More."

But what neither of these weary women knew is that Mary was not traveling alone. The Holy Spirit was traveling with her on the road from Nazareth, and when Mary opened the door, the Spirit rushed in with her. People didn't say, "Hello" in those days, they said, "Shalom," and when Mary opened the door and said, "Shalom," the Spirit burst in, grabbed hold of Elizabeth, and filled her and the child in her womb with joy. Joy sprang up from her womb, joy leapt up from her soul, joy bounced up in her heart, and joy danced out of her body. It was so much joy she couldn't contain it, and she started shouting out with a loud cry. The Spirit got a hold of her, and she started singing with exclamation. She started praising God and blessing Mary and blessing herself. A weary woman living in a weary world was overcome by the power of the Holy Spirit and burst forth in song with sweet hymns of joy.

Why do we read this story like it was quiet and calm in Elizabeth's house that day? There was nothing quiet or calm about it! We've got exclamations and loud cries, leaping babies, and prophesying women. When that door was open, the Spirit rushed in there like it was Pentecost in the hill country of Judea and it filled Elizabeth and Mary with surprising joy. A song also burst forth from Mary's chest magnifying the Lord, rejoicing in her savior, echoing Elizabeth's exclamation, and announcing her own blessing. Two weary women living in a weary world found themselves filled with the Spirit, singing sweet hymns of joy, and blessing themselves. Can weary people living in a weary world find joy? The gospel of Luke exclaims, "Yes!" Mary and Elizabeth exclaim, "Yes!" The Holy Spirit exclaims, "Yes!" The Christmas story exclaims, "Yes!" The good news exclaims, "Yes!" But do we believe it? Do we really believe we can have joy even if we're living as weary people in a weary world?



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

We often live as if our weariness and grief have the power to eradicate our joy. We imagine that joy and sorrow are opposing forces. We think that joy cannot exist in the same space as lament and loss. But we only live this way because we've confused joy with the emotion of happiness or the experience of pleasure. But happiness and pleasure are occasional and fleeting, but joy is something that is always present and available. Joy transcends emotion and the situation. Not only do we have the power to remain in joy even amid our griefs and losses, but joy cannot exist apart from sorrow. Joy and sorrow are partners who dance together with one another inside all of us.

In his book, *Inciting Joy*, poet Ross Gay writes, "Among the most beautiful things I've ever heard anyone say came from my student who said: 'What if we joined our wildernesses together?' Our bodies carry a wilderness, an unexpected territory, where yours and mine might somewhere, somehow, meet and even, join. And what if the wilderness is our sorrow? or...the 'intolerable' in life. It often astonishes me sometimes how every person I get to know regardless of everything, lives with some profound personal sorrow. Brother addicted. Mother murdered. Dad died in surgery. Rejected by their family. Cancer came back. Not to mention the existential sorrow we all might be afflicted with, which is that we, and what we love, will one day die. Is this sorrow the great wilderness? Is sorrow the true wild? And if it is—and if we join them—your wild to mine. What if we joined our sorrows? I'm saying: What if that is joy?"ⁱ

Ross goes on to say, "What happens if joy is not separate from pain? What if joy and pain are fundamentally tangled up with one another? Or even more to the point, what if joy is not only entangled with pain, or suffering, or sorrow, but is also what emerges from how we care for each other through those things? What if joy, instead of refuge or relief from heartbreak, is what [blooms] from within us as we help each other carry our heartbreaks? [Then] not only does joy not exist absent sorrow, but it actually requires sorrow to exist. The way I think of joy is that it is what is luminous about us when we're helping each other, when we're holding each other through our sorrows. In trying to articulate what, joy is, it occurred to me that joy is the mostly invisible, the underground union between us, which is, among other things, the great fact of our life and the lives of everyone and thing we love going away...We might call it sorrow, but we might call it a union, one that, once we notice it, once we bring it into the light, might become flower and food. Might be joy. Witnessing and experiencing our connection to one another is what incites joy."ⁱⁱ



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

If Ross Gay is right, then it is no wonder that joy burst forth in Elizabeth and Mary when the door was opened and the Spirit blew in, because they immediately experienced their profound connection to one another as humans, as Judeans, as women, as future mothers. They immediately experienced their profound connection with God and the fulfillment of the promise made to their ancestors. They immediately experienced their profound connection to God's plan for the salvation and liberation of the world. And they also experienced a profound connection with their own weary souls as they both began to bless themselves. Joy is the experience of profound connection with our selves, with each other, with God, with Creation, and the world.

The world is trying to encourage us to believe in the lie of separation, alienation, independence, and individualism. But joy is the experience of having all those lies ripped away. It is removing the evil of alienation from our thoughts, having the lie of separation fall like scales from our eyes, and allowing the idol of individualism to be ripped from our hearts. We are not alone or independent. We are dependent rational animals. We are not self-made or self-sustained. We are connected to one another, to God, to ourselves, and to Creation in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Part of what it means to live in joy is to be people who practice our connection to each other in a culture of disconnection, to practice our dependence on each other in a culture of independence, to practice community with each other in a culture of individualism, and practice relationships in a culture of alienation.

There are schools of philosophy that claimed that no true joy is possible in a world marked by capitalism. And as Achille Mbembe notes that European colonizers stereotyped Black Africans as simplistic and primitive "captives to the empire of joy." There are writers, scholars, and talking heads who are trying to tell us the joy is either not possible in a weary world or that joy is simplistic empire of weary people. But that's not what God says about joy. That's not the biblical picture or Mary's description of the kingdom. In the Magnificat, it is clear, we are all destined to become captives to the empire of joy. So, we must ask ourselves, "Who taught you that you weren't worthy of joy? What is the voice inside your head said you aren't allowed to have joy, that you don't deserve joy, that you're not good enough for joy, that you don't have time for joy, or that joy's not possible in this life?" Sometimes that voice is our parents, our family, our spouse, our jobs, the world in general. Sometimes it's our own voice telling us we can't have joy. Whoever or whatever that voice is, we need to tell it to "shut up!"



Every structure of power, every force of domination, every system of oppression was trying to tell Elizabeth and Mary they could not have joy. Roman occupation, economic deprivation, and patriarchal subjugation were bearing down on their bodies and yet the Spirit still blew in and filled them with joy, and that joy spilled over into song that moved to acknowledge their blessings and to prophetic proclaim the advent of a new world of justice and peace. Mary sang, "God has shown strength with their arm; scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; filled the hungry with good things, sent the rich away empty." This song was not just a declaration of what God was doing in Mary's life, but God's preferential option for the poor that became the mission statement for her son Jesus and the platform of the upside-down kingdom he would embody.

Joy is the practice of survival and an act of resistance. Reaching for joy, being joyful, can be emancipatory and liberative. It has potential for deeply meaningful political agency. Shared joy is a key resource in collective struggle for freedom from all forces of death and separation. There is joy to be found both in both collective struggle for social transformation, and in claiming the validity and importance of individual lives that are lived joyfully. There is joy to be found in striving together for a better future, for all God's people. We must have the stubbornness to seek joy and hold our joy in the ruthless furnace of this weary world.ⁱⁱⁱ

The intersectional feminist poet and activist Audré Lorde wrote a lot about the revolutionary power of joy. She would often speak about the integral role that joy played in the movement for peace, justice, and liberation and she described the joy of living as one of our most potent weapons. Later, when diagnosed with Cancer, Lorde wrote, "The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between people which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference. Once we recognize what it is we are feeling, once we recognize we can feel deeply, love deeply, can feel joy deeply, then we will demand that all parts of our lives produce that kind of joy. [Our brightest] tomorrow belongs to those of us who conceive of it as belonging to everyone, who are willing to give the best of ourselves to it, and to do it with joy."^{iv}



All the things that make us weary people living in a weary world aren't going away anytime soon, but the good news is we can still live in joy. All our sorrows and disappointments, losses and griefs aren't going away anytime soon, but the good news is that weeping may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning. Joy comes when share our sorrows with each other because joy is connection. Joy is relationships. Joy is collective resistance to forces of evil, death, and separation. Joy is scattering the proud, taking down the powerful, lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty. Joy is sharing our lives together and working for justice, striving to make the world more like the kingdom of God.

No matter what is going on in our lives or our world joy is always present because God is always with us. Even though we are weary people living in a weary world, we *can* still rejoice because like Mary and Elizabeth we can open the door and let the Spirit blow into our lives with the full force of resounding joy. And when the Spirit comes in don't be surprised if it causes you to sing sweet hymns of joy—not just "Joyful, Joyful" and "Joy to the World," but those underrated Christmas carols, "This joy that I have, the world didn't give it to me. This joy that I have, the world didn't give it to me. This joy that I have, the world didn't give it to me. And if the world didn't give it, the world can't take it away."

ⁱ Ross Gay, *Inciting Joy*, Algonquin, 2023.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quote attributed to Jack Gilbert.

^{iv} Audré Lorde, "A Burst of Light: Living with Cancer," 1988.