

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, December 11, 2016)

Texts:

Luke 1:46b-55 (New Revised Standard Version)

Note: In our service of worship we sang Mary's Magnificat in a song by David Haas entitled, "My soul is Filled with Joy"

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness
of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Isaiah 35:1-10 (The Inclusive Bible)

Let the desert and the wilderness exult! Let it rejoice and bloom like the crocus! Let it blossom profusely, let it rejoice and sing for joy! The glory of Lebanon is bestowed on it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of Yahweh, the splendor of our God.

Strengthen all weary hands, steady all trembling knees. Say to all those of faint heart: "Take courage! Do not be afraid! Look, Yahweh is coming, vindication is coming, the recompense of God—God is coming to save you!"

Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf will be unsealed. Then those who cannot walk will leap like deer and the tongues of those who cannot speak will sing for joy. Waters will break forth in the wilderness, and there will be streams in the desert. The scorched earth will become a lake; the parched land, springs of water. The lairs where jackals used to dwell will become thickets of reed and papyrus. And through it will run a highway, a road called the Sacred Path. The unclean may not travel by it, but it will be for God's people alone: and no traveler—not even fools—will go astray. No lions will be there, nor will any fierce beast roam about it, but the redeemed will walk there—for those whom Yahweh has ransomed will return. They will enter Zion shouting for joy, with everlasting joy on their faces; joy and gladness will go with them, and sorrow and lament will flee away.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: “Soul Song”

A song sung in the night. A voice crying in the wilderness. A desert springing to life. The hope of a people fulfilled.

Those who are hungry, filled to the brim; those who can't see given new eyes; the lame now leap, the deaf now hear.

An ancient prophet's song of hope turns into a very young maiden's song as she is filled with the joy of what God has been creating, is now creating and will be creating for all future generations.

What better way to bring joy and hope to humanity then through a baby? Here with Mary and with us, the image of creation as a womb and a world are touched by their maker and filled with glorious life. How can anyone help but sing?

In our Hebrew testament reading for today from chapter 35, Isaiah gives us another aspect of the peaceable kin-dom he described so vividly and fantastically in chapter 11 as we explored it last week. To our menagerie of wolves lying down with lambs and leopards with goats and calves and lion cubs grazing together we now add flowers bursting forth from the barren land like crocuses; water issuing forth to create streams in the driest desert and a Sacred Path winding through it all like God's yellow brick road where a child shall lead us singing not into Oz but Zion where all of our sorrow and sighing shall be turned into joy!

You can truly hear and feel this joy rushing through Mary, as she rushes over to Elizabeth's house, can't you? Here is Elizabeth, her older cousin carrying within herself the one who will prepare the way for the child the young Mary is carrying, the child who shall lead us all.

And being touched by Elizabeth on her body and in her heart, Mary can't help but burst into song – this magnificent Magnificat we just sang in a beautiful setting by David Haas, a song which, as our Seasons of the Spirit describes it, “boldly summarizes what the entire New Testament promises is God's intent: the promise of coming power-reversals, the elated news of revolution among us, the model of how we might give ourselves to faith in a God who truly steers us towards liberation.”

In his essay, “A Halo for the Right Answer,” StillSpeaking writer Robert Naylor exhorts that, “we inheritors of the mainline Protestant traditions need to give more attention to Mary because she is one of us.” He encourages us to take away the halos so often associated with her image throughout history and realize that “she's fully human...earthy and unsure of herself – a work in progress...Mary faced and struggled with how to answer the same question we wrestle with when God calls US to be a vessel of Christ's grace and truth,” he writes, “...set[ting] aside her reservations, her fears, the realities of the risks involved and [saying] "Yes!"

Where, I wonder, are the moments of joy in your own life? What, if you really thought about it, brings you joy? Does anything?

Looking at this story of Mary and her ability to walk through the fire of her fears and her doubts, I had to wonder what would have happened if she would have given in to those very human and understandable emotions. It would be a very different story indeed.

Where do WE stand in the way of joy entering into our own lives? How would the course of our life be different if we allowed joy to be a guiding principle in our daily lives?

Do we allow the pressures and insecurities and massive stresses of our modern lives to keep us from seeing the places where God is breaking up the dry desert and making the joyful water flow?

Do we take a moment as we're wondering why in the world the person:
-in front of us on the freeway;

-at the drive-through;
-in the grocery line;
at the Starbucks
is taking so freaking long and robbing us of our obviously much more precious time?

Is there a way we just might find joy if we took a moment to stop, breathe and notice what God is making available to us in every moment?

I have to admit to not being very joyful for just a little over a month now. With each new day and each new prediction of what is to come, my heart dips a bit and I wonder WHY, God? What in the world is going to happen in the time to come? Are the evil forces of the world overwhelming us as those who could undermine the tremendous forward movement of social change and beneficial programs so many of us in the progressive Christian movement have celebrated come to power and stir the sticky pots of sexism, racism and violence so that they threaten to boil over and cover our world with...(you fill in the blank)?

And it is in these moments that I hear a strange soft song, and I'm brought up short, as I ponder in my heart how much of our joy is conditioned on things going our way.

Can we remain joyful and hope-filled when everything around us seems to be going to pot? How about when our health fails or the health of a loved one? Can we continue to trust in God and find a way to see God in every situation?

Now, let me be clear here. I'm not talking about the denial of our feelings – no, no, no - just the opposite. I've always had trouble with what I call a Pollyannaish approach to God. You know, that idea that no matter what happens, keep your chin up, smile through it and know God is just going to work it all out, Beav!

I've seen for myself how damaging this attitude can be when we inflict it on others going through situations or experiences that we think we would handle differently or they should just "get over." Each person's journey is his or her own and I believe God calls us to meet each person wherever he or she is on their individual journey and, as God reflected in Jesus, bring compassion, love and light to each other right where we are.

THIS, I believe is the path that leads to true and authentic joy. Have you ever observed how little children respond to someone experiencing pain? I have. And when I see the deep curiosity and caring that bursts forth instantly from their hearts; I am filled with hope as I realize they truly can lead us in a way of understanding and empathy that opens us to ultimate joy.

"In this Advent season, we in the church are keenly aware that we wait in community for the promises of God to unfold in our lives," my UCC guru Kate Matthews writes. "Here, in community, we hold one another up when one of us needs encouragement or support. We help one another search for meaning, rejoice with one another, walk alongside one another..."

Sometimes," she says, "we just sit in the dark quiet and wait, together, trusting in the promises of God, listening for a word from the Still-speaking God."

"As Mary sings the Magnificat," Sharon Ringe says in the Westminster Bible Companion, "she leads "a chorus of all those whose dreams and yearnings are given voice in its words."

And what are those dreams and yearnings do you think? Why the ones we all have - as exemplified by the dreams and yearnings expressed by Isaiah and passed down through the ages, even through the teenaged Mary and all these hundreds of years later to us experiencing life in every age: To live at peace with one another, to see everyone have enough to eat and drink, to be strong and unafraid, and to be filled with gladness and joy.

"But Pastor," I hear you say, "is that magical, peaceable kingdom really possible?"

Well, “ADVENT invites us to imagine ‘impossible’ future scenarios for our world, and then open ourselves to their power to lure us forward,” Dr. Bruce Epperly writes in his commentary on this Lukean text.

“Advent invites, and it also judges,” he reminds us. “Advent asks, “Where are we going in history and in our personal lives? How far are we from the vision of personal, ecological, and global healing imagined by Isaiah, Mary...and Jesus?”

“We are a long way from Isaiah’s vision,” he admits, “but the spiritual arc of history challenges us to continue our pilgrimages toward God’s realm.”

And sometimes that pilgrimage will take us to the most unlikely places. Perhaps, it will even lead us to a most unexpected song of joy.

Barbara Lundblad at Union Theological Seminary in New York recounts the story of Chuck Campbell, who taught preaching at Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Georgia.

Chuck, she says, “required students in one of his classes to lead worship and preach at the Open Door Shelter for homeless people in downtown Atlanta. One day he was leading worship in front of the shelter, amid the very loud noise of rush-hour traffic.

After shouting out the call to worship and attempting to sing a song, Chuck’s plans were interrupted as he recounts the story:

“I noticed one homeless man waving to me and pointing to himself. I was surprised when I saw him motioning to me,” Chuck said, “for the man could neither hear nor speak and is normally very reserved. But there he was, eager to do something. He stepped into the middle of the circle, bowed his head in silence, and began to sign a hymn for us. It was beautiful, like a dance... In that moment our notions of ‘abled’ and ‘disabled’ were turned upside down. The rest of us had been shouting to be heard, but the noise was no problem for our friend...Our worship became a token of the resurrection in the midst of the powers of death, a glimpse of God’s beloved community.”

Prayer For Joy by Stuart Kestenbaum

What was it we wanted
to say anyhow, like today
when there were all the letters
in my alphabet soup and suddenly
the ‘j’ rises to the surface.
The ‘j’, a letter that might be
great for Scrabble, but not really
used for much else, unless
we need to jump for joy,
and then all of a sudden
it’s there and ready to
help us soar and to open up
our hearts at the same time,
this simple line with a curved bottom,
an upside down cane that helps
us walk in a new way into this
forest of language, where all the letters
are beginning to speak,
finding each other in just
the right combination
to be understood.