

The word for today is JOY. Mary's song is a one of overflowing joy for what is happening inside her and also inside her cousin Elizabeth. It is a song of joy for what all this means in the future for not only Mary but for Israel. We might ask why this young, teenage unwed mother is so full of joy.

Some people might think she was full of joy because she knew the future, but if this were true, wouldn't she also know that one day her heart would be broken by a cross? And why would a young girl, for whom being unmarried and pregnant in that time and place would mean great shame and ostracism, why would she be joy-filled? Of course, being pregnant with one's first child is an experience of indescribable joy for many, but under these circumstances?!

The third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of joy in what is often called "the happiest time of year," is indeed joyful for some and not so much so for others. During this season, some people come to church because the church is beautiful, the music inspiring, the treats at the refreshment table are special, and the story of Jesus starts out generally happy, though with a few glitches such as Mary's predicament.

But others come to church because they need to hear a word of joy to heal their brokenness, or to be encouraged or perhaps to not be alone at this time of year when families are often together. I remember crying through a few worship services during this "happiest time of the year."

The joy of this season is truly a paradox. A young girl low on the social ladder is the bearer of joy. A disgraced couple are chosen as vessels for God's joy incarnate. The son of God is not born in Beverly Hills but Bethlehem. In the paradox of how the story is and how we might think it should be, God reveals unexpected joy.

Part of the paradox, the reversal, of this story is that the extraordinary finds fullness in the ordinary. This is good news for most of us who are ordinary folks in fairly ordinary circumstances. Actually, I take exception to this description, because I am extraordinarily blessed. If I am to receive the blessing of this paradox, it will be through remembrance and participation in the lives of folks who live lives like teenage shepherds, unwed mothers, families living on the edge and under the thumb of the powers of their culture. By touching the lives of people less extraordinarily blessed, I experience joy. There is indeed great joy in being able to give.

I've been surprised by joy at various times in my life. I remember the joy of Brittany's first Christmas Eve, going to church, coming home eating dinner and watching *The Christmas Carol*. I was an exhausted mother but joyous because I'd waited four years for this baby girl.

Another Christmas Eve I was a single mom preparing to move two little girls to Claremont to go to seminary; it was an Exodus of sorts; and I was terrified. I sobbed all the way through that Christmas Eve service. But in the midst of loss and transition, there were church friends who literally sustained me body and soul without their even fully knowing the burden I carried in my heart.

There were Christmases after the girls and I found Tom when exhaustion and joy mixed as I did two Christmas Eve services, and then, we came home to stuff turkey and slip cards with special messages under each girl's bedroom door. And there was Christmas two years ago, 2008, when Tom and I were sequestered in the City of Hope. Jean's son Kevin taped my Christmas Eve sermon in the hospital chapel.

Within the confines of that hospital room, we experienced the joy of Tom's bone marrow cells beginning to grow and replace those cancerous cells. It was joy in the midst of uncertainty and fear, and joy that we had each other and could be together.

There are extraordinary moments of great joy but mostly I think we should allow for joy in the ordinary time of life--a smile of a child, holding a newborn baby, kissing our spouse good-night, feeling gratitude that we live in America. The profound joy of Mary's Magnificat leads us to heights of possibility where salvation, redemption, wholeness, harmony and love abound for all, and we can anticipate being part of making God's great joy for all to come to be.

True joy persists in the midst of life as it is, and its power draws us to create more joy in the world for those who cannot do it for themselves. We are not self-made men and women, we are God-made beloved children. And just as Charles Dickens's character Ebenezer Scrooge learns that there is more to life than self-sufficient isolation, we are reminded yearly that our joy is intertwined and interdependent on the joy of others.

In a recent *Funny Times*, Garrison Keillor writes about his "Christmas angel from Nebraska." These are his words:

*In a deli three days before Christmas on 10th Avenue in New York City, a rather elegant young woman was managing a herd of eight teenaged boys, ordering their breakfasts from the lady behind the counter. The boys spoke Spanish, which the young woman translated into English for the counter lady. I'm standing there, waiting my turn, observing.*

*The boys are docile, cautious, soft-spoken, and then it dawns on me that they are so because of brain damage, mild retardation, however you want to put it, and the young woman is their hired shepherd. A teacher's aide perhaps. Probably minimum wage. She is lovely, green-eyed, dark hair spilling down on a puffy parka, red wool scarf, and her English sounds very Midwestern to me.*

*The boys want muffins for breakfast except one boy who earnestly desires a sesame bagel, toasted, with cream cheese, but the deli is all out of sesame, and this is a cruel disappointment to him. He really was counting on it. When you are 14 and so desperately vulnerable in the big city, you do pin your hopes on certain small pleasures. His face crumples and he is about to melt, and the elegant young green-eyed woman puts her head down next to his where he sits slumped on the deli stool.*

*Her pale cheek against his cheek, she murmurs to him and a string of his enormous tears runs onto her face and she wipes it away and says something in Spanish that makes him laugh. And then I notice at the end of her red scarf, the word 'Nebraska.' Nobody would wear this in New York except a Nebraskan.*

*I might've asked her a few questions, but she had turned her street face toward me, and so I didn't bother her. A girl from the prairie using her Spanish to care for these boys in a callous world where, contrary to everything the Savior said, the poor and powerless get short shrift -- in the U.S. Senate and elsewhere -- and she is sharing the tears of the sesame boy and making him laugh. She's my Christmas angel. I hope she gets to go to a party and sing and dance until 3 a.m.*

If we are open even in the ordinary of days, January through December, we may be surprised with joy, surprised by acts of kindness that are unexpected miracles. We may be surprised by the joy that, in this world at times so broken and disappointing, God still comes. Joy in the midst of it all! Joy to be shared! Joy to be believed! Contagious joy to everyone and to all of God's creation.