

I Believe in God: Ode to Joy

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, December 13, 2020, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Luke 1:46-55](#)

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I like how my colleague, Bruce Epperly, says it: “The calling of Mary is as much about divine revelation as obstetrics.”¹ To be honest, I think that every birth – and not only human births – every birth is a miracle. That the stem cells that become skin cells end up on the outside of animals (including humans) is, in my book, a miracle. And in terms of our spiritual journeys, yours and mine, there is a miracle in this story of far greater importance than Mary’s pregnancy. That is the miracle of her “yes” to God.

Luke’s “nativity story begins with a surprising angelic visit to an ordinary young woman, perhaps 13-16 years of age, [based on her being] on the verge of marriage. There is no hint that she is sinless or immune from the vicissitudes of human life. There is nothing in the gospel account that would point to her uniqueness metaphysically or prenatally.... She was the child of mortals who shared in the challenges and ambiguities of mortality.”² In fact, I find seeing her as an “everywoman” to be a much richer and more challenging view than seeing Mary as a sinless immortal. She could be my sister or my niece or any one of us being “called by God, in challenging times, to give birth to God’s new age.”³

Luke tells us that soon after she found out she was pregnant, she went to visit her much older cousin Elizabeth (who was also surprisingly pregnant). It is during that visit to Elizabeth that Mary breaks into song, the lyrics of which we heard in our scripture reading today. She offers a hymn of praise that we’ve come to know by the first word of the song in Latin, the Magnificat.

In this song, Mary “proclaims her humility and God’s greatness and then launches out into a world-changing message. God’s coming rule, alive in the child she will bear, turns everything upside down. Unjust social structures are overturned – the hungry are fed, the wealthy sacrifice, tax policies benefit the poor, leaders seek peace, and schools are safe; roles are reversed as God’s peaceable realm comes to earth. This is the way life is meant to be when God’s realm is ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’ This is the calling of Jesus’ followers, especially in this time of pandemic which has starkly revealed the economic and racial injustice of the USA and has put millions at risk across the globe.”⁴

I asked the participants in Monday’s Bible Study who come to mind as they heard Mary’s hymn of praise. Jeff Bazos and Elon Musk and the other U.S. billionaires are who came to my mind. And later in the week, [this tweet](#) from Robert Reich reaffirmed that our nation is drifting away from the vision on Mary’s song.

¹ Bruce Epperly, “The Adventurous Lectionary – the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 20, 2020,” *Patheos*, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2020/12/the-adventurous-lectionary-the-fourth-sunday-of-advent-december-20-2020/> (posted and accessed 10 December 2020).

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

These were not the people that came to mind for the Bible Study participants. They thought about:

- The women who first come forward to report the sexual abuse by a longtime USA Gymnastics national team doctor.
- Students like Emma González, who have worked so hard to stop gun violence.
- Greta Thunberg and so many other young climate activists.
- Malala Yousafzai
- The women⁵ who started Black Lives Matter

I love that powerful, young woman came to mind, that people who are changing the world came to mind, and not the rulers who need to be taken down from their thrones. And after being truly moved by this list this week, I'm adding Autumn Peltier and all the Native young people who have worked and continue to work as water protectors across North America.

It seems to me that the characteristic that all of these women and girls have in common is bravery. Courageous acts, brave acts are not those that are carried out without fear. They are the acts that are carried out despite the fear. In the Bible, when angels appear to people, they almost always start by saying, "Fear not," or "Do not be afraid." I think that what they mean is "Be brave." And that call – to be brave – is a call to be vulnerable.

Now, being vulnerable is hard. Brené Brown points out, "Vulnerability is the 'gooey center' of hard emotions like shame, scarcity, fear, anxiety, uncertainty."⁶ Who wants to be feeling those emotions? I don't like feeling shame; I don't like feeling like I'm not worthy of real connection. I don't like feeling like there isn't enough. I don't like being afraid or anxious or uncertain. I want (to use Brown's term) to "armor up." I want to guard against these hard emotions and if I can't guard against them, I certainly don't want to be seen having them. However, if I guard against them, I guard against all vulnerability. And "vulnerability is also the birthplace of love, belonging, and joy."⁷ And do I want to experience love, belonging, and joy.

Brown says some really interesting and deep things about the vulnerability of love and belonging. But joy – "joy is the most vulnerable of all human emotions. We are terrified to feel joy. We are so afraid that if we let ourselves feel joy something will come along and rip it away from us and we will get sucker punched by pain and trauma and loss. That [is why,] in the midst of great things, we dress rehearsal tragedy. [Those of you who are] parents,... have you ever stood over your child while they're sleeping and thought, 'I love you like I didn't know was possible,' and then in that split second you picture something horrific happening to your child? [Or how about this, if you never had children or your children are grown.] ... You wake up you're feeling pretty good: things are good, your

⁵ Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi.

⁶ Brené Brown, "The Call to Courage," a Netflix special. The quotes are not exact – both because of my transcription skills (or lack thereof) and because some editing makes it easier to understand.

⁷ *Ibid.*

family's good, the house is good, and suddenly you're thinking, 'Holy ****' and you're waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"... When we lose our capacity for vulnerability, joy becomes foreboding. It becomes scary to let ourselves feel it. The research participants [Brown studies] who had the ability to lean fully into joy only share one variable in common. They only share one thing across all the variables.... The one thing they share is gratitude – they practice gratitude.... Vulnerability has a real physiology. Our body [have a physiological reaction to vulnerability]. Some people use that as a warning to start dress rehearsing for bad things. Some of us try to use it as a reminder to be grateful.

"[Which can be hard, because] gratitude is also vulnerable.... Sometimes we're afraid to feel gratitude because we feel like it is dangerous to say 'I'm grateful' for something because it is like someone listening take it away. My God doesn't work that way, [and even though I believe that,] sometimes I fear God might [it] anyway...."⁸

So, Brown suggests, "just do the joyful thing for the hell of it. Just choose joy sometimes. Just choose a thing that seems frivolous and fun and has no return-on-investment or payoff or upside. Just do the joyful thing you know."⁹

If Brené Brown is right (and I think she is), that "joy is the most vulnerable of all human emotions," I wonder if there's a correlation for the opposite direction. It seems that joy can come or be chosen in the most vulnerable and hopeless of situations.

Consider Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Beethoven wrote it when he was deaf. That means he never heard an orchestra and chorus perform it. And he knew he never would hear it as he was writing it. Sick, alienated from almost everyone, Beethoven nevertheless created an anthem of joy that embraces the transcendence of beauty over suffering. It has become an anthem of liberation and hope around the world.

It is the piece the students in Tiananmen Square played over their loudspeakers in 1989 as the army came to crush their struggle for freedom.

Women in Chile, living under the Pinochet dictatorship, sang the Ninth at torture prisons, where men inside took hope when they heard their voices.

The Berlin Wall collapsed to the sound of the Ninth.

In Japan each December, the Ninth is performed hundreds of times, often with 10,000 people in the chorus, a tradition that gave the survivors of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami strength and hope.¹⁰

The entire fourth moment of the symphony is about joy, and to sing about joy in these vulnerable situations seems so counterintuitive. Sort of like an unwed, pregnant teenager singing about God doing great things for her.

As Epperly points out, "Mary's willingness to say 'yes' and then act upon her affirmation inspires us to be agents in God's adventure. God presents possibilities for new

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ From the website for the documentary *Following the Ninth*, <https://www.followingtheninth.com/about-the-film.html> (accessed 12 December 2020).

birth and we are called to carry these possibilities to term and nurture them in our rough and tumble world.”¹¹ And in the process, we might find a deep joy that transforms us and the world.

Amen.

Questions for Reflection:

- What societal changes do you think are needed for God’s realm to be “on earth as it is in heaven”?
- Who are your “contemporary brave souls”?
- How well do you lean into joy?
How can you get better at leaning into joy?
- What “yes” can you say to God today?

¹¹ Epperly, *op. cit.*