

**Pilgrim Church of Duxbury
December 11, 2016
Rev. Peggy O'Connor
Luke 1:26-55
Joy to Prepare For**

Our theme this month is Joy. We began this series last week with the story of Zechariah, the priest who doubted an angel's news that his aged wife Elizabeth would give birth to a son. It showed us that when hope dies we become resistant to the joys that come into our lives.

Today we have the story of the Annunciation and Mary's greeting to Elizabeth, which we call the Magnificat. Let's see what it has to tell us that will help us live our lives of faith with more joy.

First, in case it is not already obvious, our plans are not the same as God's plans and true joy stems from following God's plan...not ours. But it is not always easy...or maybe it is rarely easy to follow God's plan. Last week's story about Zechariah made that very clear. Despite receiving good news... the change in plans that God had in mind was nigh unto impossible for old Zechariah to accept.

Mary's story shows us the alternative. She is happy. Betrothed to Joseph, she is waiting to become his wife. In paintings of this moment, Mary is seen sitting in her room, reading or sewing with a smile on her face. And why not? She is about to start her own family and become a woman in her own right. The plan is in motion. She has only to wait, anticipating the joy to come. Joy abounds in this moment. Then an angel appears saying God is

with her. What could be better than this! About to be married AND God is sending blessings! Still Mary is perplexed. She knows a visit from an angel is no little thing... even if the angel's words sound like a warm greeting.

The Angel's next words proves her right in her hesitancy. "Do not be afraid". This is like a doctor telling you this may sting a bit or you may feel a pinch; both shorthand for hang onto your hat and fasten your seat belt.

As Mary listens she hears God's plan for her to have a very special baby. Talk about a change in plans! It is preposterous but Mary, unlike Zechariah, does not say it is impossible. She just asks how it can be. The angel explains how it will happen and that the child will be holy, ie God's child. Then the angel tells Mary her cousin Elizabeth, although old, is also pregnant...proof that nothing is impossible with God. Mary agrees and the angel leaves.

What is amazing about this, other than God is the father of the baby, is that Mary is able to switch tracks quickly and easily. One minute she is humming happily to herself and in the next her world is turned upside down. She longs for children but now she will become pregnant...before finalizing her marriage. How will her parents react? How will Joseph take the news? How will friends, siblings and neighbors react? No doubt she will become the focus of gossip and criticism overnight in her little village. But she does not care about any of that. Mary agrees to a plan that could mean her ruin.

This is what makes Mary special. She accepts God's intrusion in her life as if she had been expecting it. She switches from her plan to God's with

almost no hesitation. It seems unimaginable. Would you have responded this way? I doubt I would.

Most of us are Zechariah's, not Mary's. We get attached to our plans and have trouble shifting them for anyone...even God. So how did Mary do it? Well, she came from Nazareth...a town of very religious Jews. These were people who believed God was active in life and that it was quite likely they would hear from God in a dream or a vision. If this is what you expect, then when it happens you may be startled or surprised but you pay attention.

Both Zechariah and Mary paid attention but only Mary believed what the angel said would happen. And that is because Mary was full of faith and hope. Together, her faith and her hope made it all seem possible... despite the fact that it was all going to be a huge mess. It did not matter because it was God's plan and so it was possible and Mary stepped into that possibility, filled with joy, even though she was stepping into a minefield.

Second, when Mary arrives at Elizabeth's home she is greeted with warmth and joy...Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. What an odd greeting to give to the suddenly pregnant, unmarried daughter of your close relative...unless that is...you too believe in angels and miracles. Then her reaction to seeing Mary is understandable.

Less easily grasped is Mary's response to Elizabeth. Known as the Magnificat, it is a statement of faith that is stunning. Mary is thankful for what God has done for her. But what is it that God has done for her other

than to make her life very difficult? Mary says that all generations will call her blessed BECAUSE God has looked on her with great favor...AND... because God has scattered the proud...brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly...filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty. God, says Mary, has helped the people according to the promises God made to Abraham and his descendants.

This is stunning because at this point, what God has done is send the Holy Spirit to tell Mary will bear a son who she is to name Jesus; say that the son will be great and will be called the Son of God; and that God will give him the throne of David and his kingdom will not end. All promises not yet fulfilled. But Mary's words are all in the present tense. It has happened. The world, according to Mary, has already been turned upside down by God, and this child has yet to draw breath.

I said earlier that Mary is amazing and I mean it. As Protestants we tend to sideline Mary. We love her deep faith and willingness to accept God's plans but we hate the reverence that the Roman Catholic Church has for her...and so we push her away. We are not quite sure what to make of the concept of a virgin birth so we skip over it quickly focusing on other aspects of the birth narrative. It is in the Bible so we don't throw it out...we just ignore it. However, her assumption into heaven at her death is another matter. It is not biblical and so it is out. What were those Catholics thinking?

A little history can help here. It seems that the church did not support the idea of Mary being Holy and tried to suppress Marian worship because it was seen as an incorporation of pagan goddess religions. However, the strength of this popular idea would not be put down. Slowly monks included prayers to Mary into services...why fight what is deepening people's faith? Over time justifications were found and Mary became the Mother of God.

Early Protestant reformers had no problems with Mary's position in the church but, over time Mary became a casualty of the Reformation. Today, Protestants acknowledge Mary as the mother of Jesus...possibly as the Mother of God...at Christmas. But that is it. We barely mention her the rest of the year and we certainly don't spend any time thinking about her. This is a loss. Mary is such a supreme example of faithful living, listening to and following God's wishes... faithful even in the face of disgrace for herself and her family and even in the moment of the death of her son. She is an exemplar of how faith keeps hope alive and joy possible....no matter what.

So we would be wise to rethink our relationship with Mary. Not to elevate her to the status of God but to seek her as a companion for our earthly journey of faith. She has walked this way before us and has wisdom to share. Especially how to prepare for joy.

Meister Eckhart said: What good is it that Christ was born 2,000 years ago if he is not born now in your heart? This is important because the story of the annunciation is not just a story about Mary. It is a story for each and

every one of us...no matter our gender or age. It calls to us and asks us...will you carry Jesus for God? Will you bear him into the world? Will you raise him up within yourself and within your children? Will he accompany you wherever you go and be in everything you do? Will you accompany him in his ministry of feeding the hungry...clothing the poor...sheltering the homeless...visiting the prisoners...fighting for justice for all...fighting for equity for all? Will you join him in caring for those whom the world would rather forget? Will you cross boundaries and borders to help those the world would rather ignore?

This goes beyond the question of: if called would you follow him. This asks will you bear him...carry him...share him...be with him...and will you be him in the world until his return to the best of your ability?

As a good Protestant, until more recently, I have thought very little about Mary but now I am more and more convinced that to truly be Christian means paying attention to this woman we dust off every Christmas and then put away as soon as it is over. She is our finest exemplar of faith. We may not want to pray to her but why wouldn't we want to follow her and learn from her? As we prepare for the joy of this Christmas, we might want to take a hard look at how she prepared for the first one.