

“Let it begin with Me”

Welcome to Gaudete Sunday, the Advent Sunday of joy. We lit the third candle of the Advent wreath at the beginning of the service. The candle looks pink, but the official color for today is rose. Why rose? Well, the rose is one of the flowers that symbolize the Blessed Virgin Mary. We sometimes say the *Magnificat* on this Sunday, reminding ourselves how joyful Mary was to be selected to be the *Theotokos* or Mother of God. Can you imagine her exhilaration, as well as her trepidation, she must have felt being called on by God to bear the Holy and eternal Son of God? We hear it in her response to the Angel Gabriel, in Luke when she asks, “How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?”¹ But later she says, “be it unto me according to thy word.”² Mary first troubled and mystified accepts the angel’s explanation and accepts God’s invitation. This is despite the fact that this pregnancy may cause her many problems, being an unwed mother and betrothed to a man with whom she has not been intimate. For her the joy outweighs the risk, and we are glad that she saw it that way.

But unfortunately for us that section of Luke is not one of the readings for today. The Gospel selection is curious in that it is about John the Baptizer denying that he is the Messiah. I am not sure why that reading was selected for the Sunday of Joy. It seems to me there were other possibilities. However, three of the four readings for today are explicitly about joy and rejoicing in the Lord. That said, I want to stick with the theme of joy for this Sunday; particularly as expressed in Isaiah.

The last two weeks we have heard passages from Isaiah. Last week you may recall that I said the reading was from Second Isaiah. That is, we have someone writing using Isaiah’s name who wrote excitedly about the preparation of the exiled Israelites to return to Jerusalem. This week we hear from Third Isaiah, another scribe writing in Isaiah’s name and voice about Israel after the return from exile.

You can hear the joy and excitement in the very first words of today’s passage. “The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me.” “The people that walked in darkness”³ early in the Book of Isaiah are now in a new place emotionally and spiritually even if they are in an old place, Jerusalem, physically. It is a huge transformation even if it does take place over about forty years. They have gone from a people who feel they have been abandoned by God because of their refusal to follow the law and the prophets, to a people who have been returned to God’s favor, as we heard last week, to a people who have been anointed by God.

Having been forgiven of their sins and anointed, they are now given tasks to do as the anointed people. Explicitly, they are to “bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.” That is a huge job. Also later on we heard that they will rebuild the cities that were devastated. Most important of these cities is Jerusalem. That too will be a big job, and one that will not be finished for hundreds of years.

The writer of third Isaiah must have felt the way Mary did when she was anointed by God to give birth to the Christ child. There is something so empowering

1 Luke 1:34 KJV

2 Luke 1:38 KJV

3 Isaiah 9:2 KJV

when we are touched by God and given a task to complete. But I have long wondered how many young women God asked to bear the child before God got an affirmative answer. Were there other young women in Israel equally qualified, but unwilling to take on this monumental task? How many of the people with whom third Isaiah shared his prophecy turned aside rather than take on the care of the poor, oppressed, imprisoned, and brokenhearted?

What about us? Have any of us heard a call to proclaim God's favor, or release or care for captives, or something equally large or something smaller? We can ask ourselves if there has been a time in our life where we felt the tug of something greater, to do something that perhaps we felt was greater than our skills or abilities. Did we push the thought aside as something wild and unreasonable? Did we sit with it and ponder the possibility that God was calling us to something greater than ourselves?

If we did we might have thought, "I am too young to make a difference. What can someone my age do?" Or perhaps, "I am too old what can I possibly do?" Remember the words of the Prophet Joel "Your old people will dream dreams, and your young ones will see visions. In those days I will pour out my Spirit even on servants—men and women alike. And I will cause wonders in the heavens and on the earth."⁴

Perhaps we felt too busy and could not possibly take on another thing, especially something as important as a call from God. But remember what Jesus said to Martha, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."⁵

We have many excuses and reasons for not accepting God's call. Mary had the social stigma of unwed motherhood. Joseph had the stigma of having an apparently unfaithful fiancé. Jesus had a background of poverty and coming from a backwater. Several of the apostles were unlearned fishermen, tradesmen and even a tax collector. The call that each of them received may have seemed improbable if not incredible, but let's remember what the angel said to Mary, "nothing is impossible with God."⁶

If these people and more over the past 2,000 years can do it so can we. The world cries out for peace, hope, and joy. If we do not answer God's call who will? To paraphrase a popular song, "let there be peace[, hope, and joy] on earth and let it begin with me."⁷

4 Joel 2:28

5 Luke 10:42

6 Luke 1:37

7 "Let there be peace on earth" by Jill Jackson-Miller and Sy Miller, 1955.