Rejoice Always

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for St. John's Episcopal Church
The Third Sunday of Advent, December 14, 2025: Matthew 11.3-12; Luke 1:39-56

Traditionally the third Sunday of Advent is called Gaudete Sunday, and it is the Sunday that corresponds to the pink candles in our advent wreaths. *Gaudete* is the Latin word that means "Rejoice," that comes from liturgy in some parts of the church that always say, this Sunday, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice." In the middle of the fierce holy yearning of Advent, in the darkest time of the year, in this tradition in which we resolutely refuse to arrive too soon at Christmas, we say rejoice, and all the power of heaven and earth thunders rejoice alongside us. But rejoicing in the midst of the enormous distress of this world right now can feel Pollyanna at best, or like garden variety denial, or even cruel indifference to the suffering around us at worst. How can joy touch us, how can we rejoice in God at a time like this?

When I say "at a time like this," I am referring to the terror of immigrant communities in Minneapolis and St. Paul, both those who are documented and those who are not, who are not leaving their homes for fear of being disappeared by ICE agents. Our friends at Casa Maria / St. Nicholas Episcopal Church canceled their Lady of Guadalupe service, which is one of the most important services in the year for them. Last Sunday after we blessed our St. John's member Stefania she got on a plane and went back

to Haiti, even though she was working and was singing in the choir and was making a life here with her family, since the Temporary Protected Status for Haitians was canceled.

Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mary the mother of Jesus, has long been seen as a figure who not only says yes to God, at great personal sacrifice, but she is also an advocate for the poor and the oppressed, whether we are able to have her service or not. After the Archangel Gabriel appears to Mary and says that she will bear the holy child of God, she says yes, I'll do it, even though it was deeply shameful to bear a child out of wedlock in her culture. Technically according to the law, she could have been killed for it. And she hesitated. But when the Archangel tells her that her cousin Elizabeth, an old post-menopausal woman, is also pregnant and that nothing is impossible for God, Mary says yes. And she immediately travels to visit Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth recognizes the power of what is happening with Mary, Mary speaks her powerful words we have come to know as the Magnificat. Here is part of what she says:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior
Because he has looked upon the humiliation of his servant.
From now onwards all generations will call me blessed….
The Almighty has used the power of his arm,
He has routed the arrogant of heart.
He has pulled down princes from their thrones
and raised high the lowly,
He has filled the starving with good things
and sent the rich away empty.

Here are two pregnant women rejoicing, rejoicing because they have said yes to the deep work of God birthing new things in them. They have been brave and have allowed their lives to become generous, curved outward, in service to God and the wellbeing of all people. And of course, their two children were John the Baptist and Jesus, two people who changed the course of history. But these two men could not have done so without the women who bore them who said yes to God. These women changed history and we are still singing their songs, still singing the song of rejoicing in God our Savior because even when it looks like the powerful will always be able to do anything at all that they want to the vulnerable, in the reign of God it is not so, and in the Lord's prayer we pray every week, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Now there are times when even the most faithful disciple doubts. When even the most powerful prophet has misgivings. In today's gospel reading John the Baptist sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus, in essence, "Are you really the one? Or should we look for someone else?" Now for John to ask this question shows a deep crisis of faith. John has been so sure, has led the life of a prophet, has been baptizing people and preaching that the kingdom of God has come so near, is right here, right here in the midst of the oppression of the Roman Empire. He filled the people with hope. He himself had so much courage, so much bravery. But he is languishing in the prison of King Herod, probably trying to hear anything at all about his cousin Jesus whom he baptized, who is the one he gave his life to foretell. But John doubts. Maybe he doubts because he is still languishing in prison and he had hoped his cousin Jesus, as the Messiah, would lead the revolution to overthrow the colonizer Rome and free him. We don't know

how long John was in prison but it seems it was a long time. So he asks, Are you really the one?

And Jesus' answer is telling. "Go and tell John what you see and hear: the blind see again, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life and the good news is proclaimed to the poor." Everywhere Jesus goes, preaching the exact same message as John, healing pours out of him and touches anyone in his vicinity. He cures all kinds of diseases and illnesses. It seems that in the presence of Jesus the Christ people are restored to wellbeing and health, and the crushing power of oppression can no longer distort who they are.

And this litany Jesus quotes—"the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the good news is proclaimed"—is one that is repeated frequently in scripture throughout the Psalms and the prophets. It is the sign of the presence of God's reign being made manifest. This healing happens right alongside the oppression and the terror of empire. In fact it cannot be crushed by empire at all.

A number of years ago the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa co-wrote a book called *The Book of Joy*. Both men were spiritual leaders of deeply oppressed communities: the Dalai Lama of occupied Tibet, and Archbishop Tutu of South Africa, the country ravaged by apartheid. In this book they speak about the nature of true joy, the obstacles to joy, and what for them are the eight pillars of joy, which are: perspective, humility, humor, acceptance, forgiveness, gratitude, compassion and generosity. Archbishop Desmond Tutu says this:

> We are fragile creatures, and it is from this weakness, not despite it, that we discover the possibility of true joy… Life is filled with challenges and adversity…Discovering more joy does not, I'm sorry to say, save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without being broken.[1]

You see the power that pours out of Jesus and his way of love is that even when we are deeply afraid and tempted to despair, the crushing power of oppression cannot distort who we are. They can arrest you. They can beat you. They can send you away without a phone call. They can break down your door. They can say dehumanizing things about whole countries and cultures. But with God's help, when we say yes to be willing to be brave, the power of God's Spirit joining with our truest selves can give us joy. It is the joy of knowing that nothing can make you become so blind and deaf and lame and dead inside that you stop living a life of generous, sacrificial love as our spiritual ancestors did. The power of these stories and the living God at the heart of them is that they give us hope, they give us courage, they empower us to recover our full and true selves so that we too can say yes to what God wants to birth in us. Like Mary we can have our own Magnificat's, our own creative proclamation of resistance and fierce joy and commitment to embody love and compassion.

[1] His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy* (Avery, 2016) at 11-12.

The greatest resistance is the ability to retain your ability to laugh, to be soft hearted and strong backed, to do the right thing even when it is risky, to take the long view that violence does not win in the end—love does. This does mean inconvenient things like loving our enemies, seeking and serving Christ in all people. It does mean striving for justice and peace among all sentient beings. It does mean a life that is not *incurvatus in se,* curved in on ourselves, but taking our place in the vast web of life in which all are interdependent. You see, your so-called "small" decision to intentionally embody love and courage ultimately impacts everyone and everything else. You make a difference even if you never know exactly what it is, which mostly we don't.

So even if you feel more like John in prison asking if Jesus is the one or not than Mary saying yes to the angel, take heart. There is room for you. Look for the signs of God's reign – people freed from their blindness and deadness and crippling fear and turning into agents of the deep joy of the Spirit, a joy that is unconditional because it has tapped into the truth about love and life. As I say every week in my blessing at the end of the service, Life is short. We don't have much time in effect to make a difference. So let us use the time we are given to have joy, to be generous, to show kindness and to be brave. To say yes to the creative new life God is always birthing in us. Rejoice in our God, always. And again I say, rejoice. **Amen.**