

Expecting and Experiencing Joy

Thomas Robinson, *Advent 3*, December 14, 2014

Isaiah 9:2-6

² The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
on them has light shone.
³ You have multiplied the nation;
you have increased its **joy**;
they **rejoice before you**
as with joy at the harvest,
as they are glad when they divide the spoil.
⁴ For the yoke of his burden,
and the staff for his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor,

you have broken as on the day of Midian.
⁵ For every boot of the tramping warrior
in battle tumult
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned as fuel for the fire.
⁶ **For to us a child is born,**
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Luke 1:41-55

⁴¹ And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the **baby leaped in her womb**. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! ⁴³ And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb **leaped for joy**. ⁴⁵ And **blessed is she** who **believed** that **there would be a fulfillment** of what was spoken to her from the Lord." ⁴⁶ And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and **my spirit rejoices in God my Savior**,
⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate
of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations
will **call me blessed**;
⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done
great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown **strength with his arm**;
he has **scattered the proud**
in the thoughts of their hearts;
⁵² he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and **exalted those of humble estate**;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in **remembrance of his mercy**,
⁵⁵ as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

1 Peter 1:6-9

⁶ In this **you rejoice**, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various **trials**, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸ Though **you have not seen him, you love him**. Though you do not now see him, **you believe in him** and **rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory**, ⁹ obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Luke 2:10

¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "**Don't be afraid**, for behold, I bring you **good news of great joy that will be for all the people.** ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a **Savior, who is Messiah, Lord.** ¹² And this will be the sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

Romans 5:2-5

² Through him [Jesus] we have also obtained access by **faith** into this **grace** in which we stand, and **we rejoice** in **hope** of the **glory** of God. ³ Not only that, but **we rejoice** in our **sufferings**, knowing that suffering produces **endurance**, ⁴ and endurance produces **character**, and character produces **hope**, ⁵ and **hope** does not put us to shame, because **the love of God** has been poured into our hearts through the **Holy Spirit** who has been given to us.

Romans 15:13

¹³ May the **God of hope fill you with all joy and peace** in believing, so that by the **power of the Holy Spirit** you may abound in **hope.**"

Hope, Peace, Joy

The traditional themes of reflection around Jesus' birth are closely related. We saw the pattern when we followed the idea of "Hope" through Romans and we listened to angels singing "Peace on earth...." What is the particular contribution of the idea of "Joy." We associate Christmas with happy times, generosity, etc. Perhaps that is our idea of "joy."

C. S. Lewis called his autobiography "Surprised by Joy" (1955). For him joy was a pointer that carried him through a long period of atheism. A sense of longing, an inbreaking of a momentary experience of something more in life. A newly discovered letter of his from 1945 (soon up for auction) focuses on Joy that "*shocks one awake*" – "*one second of joy is worth 12 hours of pleasure.*" Lewis puts his finger on the importance of joy in scripture.

Joy is related to hope and peace, but points to the intensity and surprising character of God's work in us. When we focus on Jesus' incarnation, we are looking at something that happens within our ordinary, very broken world (poverty, kings, taxes, armies, corrupt priests, homelessness), but that event says that brokenness is not all there is. It is a larger reality that breaks in unexpectedly and sends a thrill of joy and anticipation through us.

Light Shining into Darkness

Isaiah 9 shows how God's promises can break in like light in darkness. Celebration of harvest when all was thought lost. Oppressed by overwhelming force (Gideon and Midianites, Jdg 6-7), we survive battle, celebrate victory, inaugurate peace. A child, God with us, joy.

So also with Elizabeth and Mary: a childless woman and a girl. Both have experienced signs of God intervening in their situations at the bottom of society to give new life in the world. They come together, the only two people who could understand. Elizabeth's baby kicks, leaps! She feels it and prophetically interprets it. The thrill of joy. Hope long dying has sprung to life. Promises thought impossible are coming to realization. God is with us, not in the Herods and aristocratic high priests, but his power flows into two women. Mary sings about the joy that has seized her spirit. God has revealed a transformed world.

Surprised by Joy

The experience of joy continued as the story unfolded in Jesus and his followers. Who could have anticipated crucifixion? And Jesus' resurrection! Sorrow turned into a dance of joy.

Communities of believers formed, breaking barriers, a new humanity, spreading in spite of persecution. Peter writes to those undergoing "trials." What started with Mary lives in the inexpressible joy they feel in their faith and love for that child, their life, their glory.