

Being Present with Joy

Third Sunday of Advent

December 17, 2023

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, Luke 1:46-54

By Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

A little angel stopped by the church last week. You might have read the column I wrote about Eileen, our Advent angel. She happened to be in the neighborhood at the same time the preschoolers were gathering for Chapel Time. That was fortunate, because as you might guess, angels are a bit busy this time of year. According to Luke, they pop in and out of the story of Jesus' birth with some regularity, ending of course with the choir of angels singing praise to God over the shepherds tending their flocks.

I invited her to come and meet the children. I told them, "Ask your parents if other churches have angels visiting Mom's Day Out." You must always be marketing!

In the interest of transparency, I better stop there and clear things up. While Eileen is indeed an angel, she was not sent from heaven but from the bargain rack at Target. Secondly, Eileen didn't just happen by the church, I brought her with me. Never let the facts get in the way of a good story.

What's really interesting, however, is that when Eileen showed up she didn't have a name. She didn't pick up a name tag in the narthex. And because she's made out of cloth and doesn't speak much, we couldn't ask her.

We figured out her name when we discovered she has a hard time standing up straight. Apparently bargain-rack angels from Target can't stand up straight. I propped her up against the chalice on the Lord's table, and she leaned a bit to the left, not unlike some Presbyterians. When I fussed with her, she began leaning a bit to the right, not quite as far right as some but just a touch, also not unlike some Presbyterians. That's how we decided her name was "Eileen."

When I finally propped her up against the cross, she sort of bowed toward the children. It was a near-perfect curtsy that really impressed the kids. It soon became apparent to the kids that Eileen was quite different from the mischievous elves that sneak around their homes at this time of year. She's not an elf on the shelf, but an angel with a message. She shows up at

Chapel time bringing tidings of comfort and joy. These words are always welcome, but they seem especially inviting at Christmas. Our ears are tuned to the nonstop noise of the grinding gears of the Christmas machine.

We're conditioned into thinking that joy is the product that the Christmas machine makes – turning it out like cookies on an assembly line, or music blaring out of our so-called “smart” speakers.

Eileen brings a message of joy to those whose lives are compressed, packed to the brim. We are a bit like those pre-packaged “K cups” of coffee, tightly sealed and under pressure. This year's shortened Advent season is an example. Next Sunday will not only be the fourth Sunday of Advent, but also Christmas Eve. How is it possible to experience true joy when there is so much happening around us?

Eileen asks us to pay close attention to the song Mary sings to us today. She invites us to tune out the constantly repeating versions of “Sleigh Ride” and “You're a Mean One, Mr. Grinch.” She suggests we don't worry about the little girl pleading for a hippopotamus or the woeful tale of the old lady who gets tackled by Santa's reindeer. Today we can stop letting the earworms of Christmas music play over and over in our hears: Wham's nonstop singing of “Last Christmas,” or Mariah Carey's “All I Want for Christmas is You.” Instead, take a deep breath, and hear the surprisingly gentle yet profoundly prophetic syncopation of Mary's song of praise.

Breathe in: “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Breathe out: “and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

Breathe in: “For God has looked with favor on my lowly stature.” Breathe out: and from now all generations will call me blessed.” Or hear it anew in the words of Eugene Peterson's translation:

I'm bursting with God-news;
I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.
God took one good look at me, and look what happened—
I'm the most fortunate woman on earth!
What God has done for me will never be forgotten,
the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.
His mercy flows in wave after wave
on those who are in awe before him.

He bared his arm and showed his strength,
scattered the bluffing braggarts.
He knocked tyrants off their high horses,
pulled victims out of the mud.
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;¹

That is the good news we need this morning. Mary's song resonates with the courageous songs of Biblical women who felt God's life stirring within them. Like Elizabeth, her cousin, Mary experiences joy as more than mere happiness. And like Hannah, the mother of Samuel in the Old Testament, Mary has discovered that the amazing source of that joy is the promise that with God, nothing shall be impossible.

Yet Mary's life is not immune from pain. Her story neither begins nor ends with pure serenity and constant happiness. Filled with fear and uncertainty, Mary flees her home to avoid public shame. But as soon as she sees her cousin Elizabeth's baby bump, new joy erupts within both of these women. Her eyes are opened to the joy of God's promise.

Suddenly the distractions of shame, anxiety, self-indulgence, and fear are reframed by the possibilities of joy, hope, peace, and love.

In her book *Right Here, Right Now*, theologian Amy Oden shares the possibilities offered to us by Christian mindfulness. She speaks of how mindfulness prayer practices can free us from the sort of lives that run wide and fast, but not necessarily deep and calm. She notes how she sees individuals and families who long for a "rootedness that goes deep rather than lives in scattered fragments." It is the abundance of that Jesus promises, the abundance that lives with our eyes opened wide to the possibilities of connection and wholeness. It is a life, she says that is whole, and not fragmented."

A life that is rooted in joy and not simply happiness.

Joy moves beyond mere happiness when it shares the gift of God's abundance – with the homeless in St. Louis, with those who are struggling with mental illness, with those are longing for community.

Mary opens herself to that possibility, and it is the possibility God offers us at Christmas. For her, and for us, it is a life framed by grace. That grace is formed out of an awareness of God's

¹¹ Luke 1:47-55, *The Message*.

presence with us, and with those who have so little. Mary realizes that God's grace is not only a moment of individual transformation, but a time of transforming the world.

This is the joy Ebenezer Scrooge feels when he falls out of bed on Christmas morning. And it is the sort of deep, lasting joy that will free us from feelings of self-loathing and paralyzing anxiety as we open ourselves to the possibilities of God at work in the world.

As the baby leaps within Elizabeth, Mary sees the grace of God that transforms and changes lives. Suddenly, there is no more fear of the future. Suddenly, she is filled with the promise that God is with her. She understands that the child within her will bring great things.

She will give birth to an impossibility: not only will this child change her, but will also change the world. And it is this sort of impossible, improbable, and unlikely joy that will change us and our world if we have eyes to see, and ears to hear. Amen.