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**Psalm 146:5-10**

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, <sup>6</sup> who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; <sup>7</sup> who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; <sup>8</sup> the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. <sup>9</sup> The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. <sup>10</sup> The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

**Luke 1:46-55**

“My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. <sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. <sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

**“Advent: Songs of Joy”**

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In case you missed it, the theme today is joy. We lit the advent candle for joy, we’ve been singing songs about joy. I just read scripture lessons about joy. And we have every reason to be joyful. It is, after all, “the most wonderful time of the year.” This is the season of happiness and light, the season of wonder and mystery, the season of generosity and gratitude. This is the season when, every single hallmark station Christmas movie is reminding us, love and mercy can soften even the hardest hearts, and every story can have a happily ever after. Hear the echo of the psalmist’s words reverberating through the cosmos: “happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob.”

But I have a confession. I’m not feeling *happy* right now.

I'm feeling tired and burdened by all of the expectations and obligations that come with this "most wonderful time of the year." When did we begin to buy in to the idea that the spirit of Christmas was defined by our level of exhaustion --- the exhaustion that comes from trying to make everything festive, and abundant, and extravagant, and perfect?

And I am feeling a little righteous anger, at how vividly the commercialization of Christmas – the blatant messages of consumerism that assault our senses from every advertisement - illuminate the divide between the haves and the have-nots in our communities. So many of us are overspending on trivialities while so many have so little to spend on the basic necessities of life.

And I'm feeling grief. Because our congregation and community are missing loved ones right now. Some who have left us in these recent days, and some who have been gone...longer. But we never stop missing them, especially during these *family togetherness* holidays.

So, no, I'm not feeling *happy*. I'm feeling a little disillusioned in the midst of the glitter and glimmer? Is anyone else feeling that way?

No, I'm not feeling particularly happy. I *am* feeling something much more important; I am feeling *joyful*.

*Happy* is fleeting and in the moment. It comes and goes on the breeze. I am not going to bore you with all of the reasons why the use of happy in the translation of verse one of Psalm 146 is problematic. But I will tell you that psalmist didn't mean happy in the way we, in our culture, think of happy. Psalm 146 is a "hallelujah" psalm that proclaims the power and wonder of God in his righteousness, executing justice for the oppressed, feeding the hungry, setting the captive free, and restoring sight to the blind. Translators used the word *happy*. But the psalmist intended something deeper and richer that implies a flourishing of spirit. Something more like joy. Where happiness fades and returns subject to circumstances, *joy* is deep and abiding, transcending our temporary circumstances. Friends, we are not always going to be happy, but we can always be joyful.

Consider the beautiful example of joy illuminated by today's text. The portion of the gospel that we read from Luke, chapter 1, is known, traditionally, as *The Magnificat* – Mary's song of praise to God for the miracle of Christ's birth.

Consider Mary. She was a young woman, a teenager, a child herself, really, who was engaged to be married to a kind, handsome, successful, carpenter. We're imagining right? Why can't we imagine Joseph was Mary's dream prince just like in the Hallmark movies? Her future is shiny and bright. But, she has just discovered she is pregnant...and her fiancé' is not the father. Very good circumstances have just become very horrible. It is not a stretch to imagine that there were some very difficult conversations with her parents, and extended family, and Joseph. It is not a stretch to imagine that there were tears, and accusations, and gossip, and shame. So much shame. For Mary. For her family. For Joseph.

Put yourself in that story. It was a crisis for all of them. It was not a time of happiness, or hopefulness, or wonder. It was a time of longing, and learning, and doubting, and praying.

And in the midst of this crisis something wells up within Mary that transcends her circumstances, and she begins to sing a song of joy. Because her joy is unfailing and consuming, and it transcends the shame and doubt of the moment. Her joy is rooted in a deep and abiding faith, and an unwavering conviction that sees beyond the present circumstances to what God is accomplishing through her.

The nativity paints Mary as a meek, quiet, even passive figure. But she is not. She is bold; she is brave; she is a prophet with a ribbon of steel running through her as she stands up to her accusers to proclaim the truth of Emmanuel, God with us. The light that shines in the darkness and changes the world. Her song is not a happy little Christmas carol; it is a song of revolution. I mean, did you hear the words of her song?

"His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. <sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

She is saying, with absolute conviction, that Jesus is going to change the world. She believes it so completely that she sings about it as if it has already been completed. There is a verb tense in Greek that doesn't translate to English that implies a completed and finished action. And that is what Mary is singing. She is not singing that Jesus is going to do *the thing*. She is singing that Jesus, who isn't even born yet, has already done *the thing*. It's her way of communicating that it is a sure thing; nothing can interrupt, or stop, or derail the plan that God has put in motion to save God's people through Jesus.

That friends, is joy. That is the source of our joy. The knowledge that God will complete what God has promised in Jesus. No matter what happens, no matter how bad the world gets, no matter how tired, or angry, or grief-filled we are, God's promise is sure and unending. So sure and unending that it is already done, even if we haven't experienced it yet. It will not be this way forever. It will not. God will fix this. That is joy.

That is why songs of joy can never be songs of empty platitudes and fuzzy feelings. True songs of joy are songs of liberation, or they are not really songs of joy. True songs of joy are songs of justice, or they are not really songs of joy.

We need songs of joy – songs of liberation and justice – because we look around us and we see that the work isn't complete. The promise has not been fully realized. People are still suffering, and sorrowful, and hungry, and blind.

So, we sing songs of joy as if to will the realization of the promise into being.

We sing songs of joy into the face of the darkness to show the darkness that it cannot overcome us.

We sing songs of joy to encourage each other to have faith in the promise.


We sing songs of joy to inspire each other to keep busy living the promise.


We sing songs of joy – songs of liberation and justice – while we put our hands to service feeding the hungry, seeking justice for the oppressed and freedom for the captive.

We are waiting for Jesus to fulfill the promise, and while we wait, we sing songs of joy, because to sing songs of joy is to participate in what Jesus has promised to accomplish.

There is nothing passive about our waiting. There is nothing passive about our singing. There is nothing passive about Joy. Joy is bold, and brave, and prophetic. When we are able to tap into joy about what Jesus is doing, that joy overflows in all kinds of wonderful ways: in generosity; in random acts of kindness; in mercy and compassion; in a kind word; in a simple gift; in a smile and a word of encouragement.

Our songs of joy are a witness to the world, so we will sing whether we are happy or sad, rich or poor. We will sing our songs of joy despite our circumstances, because our songs of joy will carry us through the season of waiting and watching for the promise to be realized. So, sing with me, people of God:

 The joy of the Lord is my strength  
The joy of the Lord is my strength  
The joy of the Lord is my strength  
The joy of the Lord is my strength

 I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart (where)  
down in my heart (where)  
down in my heart.  
I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart (where)  
down in my heart to stay.

Alleluia! Amen.