

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
Luke 1: 39-56

I come from a line of scowlers whose resting face is pensive and serious. Smiling is a learned skill for me. The Pettit line wears a solemn demeanor. Life is solemn and requires hard work. It isn't fair. It is stressful. You never know when the next hammer is going to drop. Joy, therefore, is a bit of a learned trait.

What is joy, anyway? It has a certain buoyant connotation. Happy. Charismatic. Look on the bright side. Bubbly. Yeah, the Pettit line never bought into that so much. When I was a young adult, out on my own and working as a youth director, and with Young Life, my lineage served me well. Because I was serious and focused, working with intensity because eternity was on the line. But towards the end of my Young Life and youth work days I went to a Carnegie public-speaking event. It was a two-day event with about 10 of us Young Life folk. You'd do a short speech in front of your peers and then sit in a room and watch the video with one of the coaches. This coach had many complimentary things to say. The speech was clear, understandable, relatable. But the thing he pointed out was my posture and intensity. My shoulders were closed, he said, muscles tight, I was intense, and a little severe. His suggestion was this. Open up your posture. And smile.

I responded, "smile?! Are you serious?" That's what we are paying all this money for?! Smile?! Have you lost your marbles?!

Now smiling sounds simple. But it requires muscles. I remember on our wedding day, smiling all day long, so much so that by the end of it my face hurt. Smiling requires muscles. But it also requires perspective, a perspective that is difficult for us serious folk. In the last few years, I have learned that I am a one on the enneagram, a typology system. One is the idealist. The one is all about integrity, principle, and having a sense of what the world is supposed to be like. This means that I don't smile unless I mean it, and I have much to scowl about because the world is very much out of order.

So, as we think about Mary's delight and her rejoicing this morning, it makes me wonder what fuels such joy and hope. Where does it come from? How do we have joy emanating from us when we are bogged down with the seriousness of life? There is much to worry about. Families worried about finances, parents worried about the world their children will inherit, friends or family facing serious health concerns, and the question of if we will ever get post-pandemic?

What is joy? What is it rooted in? Some like to differentiate Joy from happiness. Happiness, they say, is rooted in circumstances, in favorable circumstances. Happiness is therefore fickle, subject to change. Joy, on the other hand, is a state not rooted in circumstances. Perhaps a choice. It is a choice to be joyful, independent from one's environment. That sounds nice. But I say, Baloney!

Now that may be the enneagram one in me speaking. But it is also the Bible scholar in me. For joy in the Bible is a response. It is the response to God's intervention and help. Mary shows up at Elizabeth's door for a reason. They rejoice and celebrate together, not because of some choice divorced from their circumstances; on the contrary, they rejoice because of their circumstances, because God has blessed them, shown favor, given them a role in God's redemptive plan.

But the important aspect of this is that Mary and Elizabeth also view their circumstances in light of God's redemptive history, which gives them perspective, and consequently, joy despite the unknowns. Mary sees God at work in her story, and it creates the response of joy, celebration, and hope.

Mary has unknowns. Her circumstances are not all rosy. If you were Mary's mother, what catastrophic fears would be running through your mind? She is a young girl pregnant out of wedlock, which could easily determine her future in negative ways. She has no idea what she has gotten into. She has never given birth. Never raised a child. And here the God's messiah has fallen into her responsibility. There are so many things that could go wrong, so many things that Mary could be panicked about. Ian Cron, one of the gurus of the enneagram, he talks about some who tend to worry. He says that they suffer from PTSD, not post-traumatic stress disorder. Rather, they suffer from pre-traumatic stress disorder. Meaning, they imagine everything that could possibly go wrong, so much that they have already experienced the emotional impact of it, and are therefore traumatized by it before any of it has a chance to actually happen.

Mary, her mother, or Elizabeth, would all be justified in their pre-traumatic stress. They would all be justified to have a narrow posture, tight muscles, and a scowl on their faces. But that is not what we hear. We hear a song of joy and celebration, face muscles naturally expressing what is flowing from their hearts.

Joy in the Bible is the fitting response to God's actions on one's behalf. When David returned from defeating Goliath, the people rejoiced and danced. The psalmist of Psalm 27 offers his sacrifice with a testimony of being free of his

enemy, and he offers his sacrifice with shouts of joy. Psalm 33 calls listeners to rejoice and goes on to extol all God's acts and God's benefits to his followers. In Luke 10, the disciples return to Jesus with joy, telling stories about how the evil spirits obeys them, and the great works God accomplished through them. Mary and Elizabeth join that long tradition. God has blessed them, and they respond with joy.

I emphasize again that Joy comes from perspective. Mary had plenty of reason for stress and complaint. But she saw herself within God's plan, saw her own situation in light of God's works in the past. She sings, "for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." She sings about the God who chooses to lift up the lowly and bring down the proud, like Abraham and Sarah in their decrepit old age, or Moses who could not speak without stuttering, Hannah the barren, or David runt of the litter. She sees herself within this tradition, remembering God's works in the past and seeing her own story in this light. This is what gives her hope and joy. And she sings, forgetting for the time all the things that she might worry about. She sings. She celebrates because her eyes and her perspective are not towards the details of the future, which she does not know, but the events of God's loving and redemptive work in the past.

As I have said a couple times this week, both at our Tuesday morning conversation and on Thursday morning with the men's breakfast, there is a different orientation and perspective towards time in the Old Testament and the Psalmic tradition. Mary's song sounds very much like a psalm that we might read in the book of psalms.

You see, we think of ourselves as facing the future, looking at what is ahead, the past behind us. We are told, in fact, not to focus on what is behind us in the past, but look to what is ahead in the future. Paul, a western, Greek thinking fellow, he says in his letter to the Philippians, "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead." But in Hebrew thought, we don't face the future. We face the past; the future is at our backs. The word for ancient history is from the same root as the word for what is before you, or your front: qedem. And one of the ways to express the future, that is what comes after, is the word for your back, 'acher, or what is behind you.

In Hebrew thought, we don't face the future, we face the past, the future is at our backs. We can't see it. It is unknown. We only know what has happened. We only know generally what God will do in the future because we know how God acted for God's people in the past. So we move into the future with the confidence and wisdom that comes from how God has worked in the past. This doesn't mean that

God won't do unanticipated things, or that life won't be hard, but the way we respond is by trusting the God who we know from how he has worked in the past.

You see, despite the seriousness and unknowns of life, Joy is a response that comes from seeing yourself as a character in God's story. That is what we hear in Mary's song. It is a song that celebrates how God works to lift up the lowly and to bring down the proud. It is a song about reversals, and intervention on behalf of the disempowered. It speaks to God's character as seen in the past. How it will play out in the present will not be seen for some time, and there is much that could go wrong or with great difficulty.

Now scholars typically think that this song is written later and placed on Mary's lips by the editor. It speaks of things as if they are all accomplished. It speaks with a clarity and confidence unbecoming of a young overwhelmed girl, they think. And perhaps they are right. Or perhaps, this reductive perspective is driven by western thinking people who want to know the future, who are quick to belittle those too young to know what to expect, those too ideal to have not been worn down yet, too young to understand the ways of the world.

But while we stare into the future and its complexities and unknowns, and give ourselves ulcers over what we cannot control, maybe the young, somewhat naïve, but faithful Mary has something to say to us. Maybe the one who is confident to see herself in light of God's redemptive history, maybe that person is the wiser. Maybe the voice of Mary, as articulated in this song, is the voice of wisdom, and confidence, and hope.

“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.

Now there is much unresolved for Mary. She has some hard days coming. But we do not hear such concerns weighing down her voice, we do not hear sign that the weight of her calling, the magnitude of the threats, or the heaviness of the world is twisting her face into a scowl. We hear of joy. Joy rooted in a robust memory, in a clear recall of who God is via God's actions that are known from the scriptural stories passed down.

We live in a season where we cannot predict what is going to come, we certainly can't control it, and it has a way of wearing us down. We have experienced nearly two years of having what we want to know or expect disrupted by a pandemic, and as much as we want to put it behind us, it continues to be in front of us. The future and its worries are enough to stress us out. But what if, like Mary, we could adjust our perspective, to take joy being part of God's story, and taking confidence in God's works in the past; what if God's great deeds were before us, in front of us, facing us down, and we could see our own story in light of that story. I wonder if we would loosen the tension in our shoulders a bit, and I wonder if it wouldn't take quite so much work to get our face muscles working, that we might smile, and we might sing, even as Mary does.

So as we come to the close of advent, which is a time of waiting, a time of unresolved hopes, a time of expectation of when God's kingdom will come to its fullness, a time when we are tempted to look to the future for our hope and confidence, we look to the future and are easily overwhelmed.

But even while we work for and wait for God's kingdom yet to come in its fullness, perhaps we should turn, recognizing that the only things we can see for sure is God's actions in the past. Perhaps we draw upon our personal and collective memory. Perhaps we should be reminded that we are called to respond with joy, joy and confidence, that though the matters of God's kingdom lie unresolved, we celebrate and we work because we see and we remember what God has already done.

Part of the history and the stories that we have to draw upon, are those of Mary, and of God entering the world in the Christ child. So even while the world is askew, it has been graced by God's presence. and what if we could see our own stories as part of that story, a world graced by God's presence? And as we do so, may we, like Mary and Elizabeth, be filled with joy, and confidence, and hope, and may we see ourselves in light of God's patterns in the past, and may our tongues be filled with praise, and may our hands find good work to do. May our posture open up, and our breath deepen, and our scowls be shaped into smiles, so much so, that a future facing enneagram one would look at us like we have lost our marbles.

### *Mary Visits Elizabeth*

<sup>39</sup> In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup> where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup> and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup> And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup> For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

### *Mary's Song of Praise*

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said,  
"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."  
<sup>56</sup> And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.