

Joy 2020

Luke 1:46–55

Center Church, Hartford

December 13, 2020

The Rev. Rochelle A. Stackhouse

Perhaps it is only in poetry that the kind of joy, the kind of rejoicing that Mary does in this song can be expressed. I recently read a poem by the great Lucille Clifton that said it like this:

why

is what I ask myself

maybe it is the afrikan in me

still trying to get home

after all these years

but when I wake to the heat of the morning

galloping down the highway of my life

something hopeful rises in me

rises and runs me out into the road

and I lob my fierce thigh high

over the rump of the day, and honey

I ride I ride

I simply love that image, because it is true to the deep feeling of joy when it hits you, and very much like what Mary did. Not trusting her joy from the angel's gift at first, she lobbed her "fierce thigh over the rump of the day" and honey, she rode. All the way to Elizabeth. Who could not contain **her** joy, nor could the child in her womb, and they both leapt and sang with utter abandon. And Mary joined them, and you have to think that Jesus in her womb did, too.

Which, in some ways, is incomprehensible, because Mary's life had become, well, complicated by this unexpected pregnancy. Because their country was occupied by Roman soldiers. Because poverty, hunger, violence, and fear were always around the corner for these women. Joy, in the midst of. Joy, imagining and trusting the other side of.

The Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai writes about "the precision of pain and the blurriness of joy." He notes that there are lots of words to describe what pain is like: throbbing, burning, sharp, dull, wrenching, debilitating. But not so many words to describe what joy is like. Think about it. Amichai writes "I want to describe, with a sharp pain's precision...blurry joy."

So does Mary. She reaches back in her tradition of poetry and song to the joy her ancestor Hannah felt, after years of infertility, at the birth of her child, the prophet Samuel. Mary remembers all the

ways God has done incredible things for her people for generations and reaches forward, imagining, even in the midst of, even in spite of, that God will do all this again in her time.

But, you may say, it didn't happen. It hasn't happened. Pain is. "God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty?" Well, yes and no. It does happen; we have seen it in our times. Mary knew that she was not pronouncing a magic spell that would make all bad things go away forever, any more than Jesus thought his life, death and resurrection would mean all the world would be sweetness and light. The poet Jack Gilbert writes "To make injustice the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil." Joy does not deny injustice, it is the energy which helps us see beyond and through injustice, to name it for what it is and stubbornly deny that it is the last word.

Joy is transformative, still. The poet Christian Wiman says that "Joy is the only inoculation against the despair to which any sane person is prone." As we are thinking about vaccinations these days, think on that. He goes on to say "Joy is what keeps reality from being sufficient unto itself, which is to say, it is what keeps reality *real*, since in this world of...quantum weirdness, where ninety-five percent of matter and energy [science] knows only to name as 'dark,' it is obvious that reality extends far beyond what our senses can perceive." Joy

celebrates the unseen, the now but not yet, the hope that the darkness of the unknown looks like the inside of a womb, a place of gestation and possibility. Even when we have no ultrasound with which to see inside it.

Every Advent, we anticipate joy. We look for it everywhere. We intentionally seek it out, something we don't often do during the rest of the year. Sometimes we try to manufacture it with glitter and credit cards, or we despair that we cannot manufacture it because our credit limit is exhausted, and so are our bodies and spirits. Joy cannot be manufactured, only stumbled upon or glimpsed or embraced like a lover. It is something we open ourselves to, not something we create on our own, not something we can fail to create for ourselves or others. It is holy. It is out there. In the midst of. In spite of. Because, God.

Joy begins in praise. "My soul magnifies the Lord." My soul says, "God is utterly magnificent," which you can only say if you open eyes, heart, soul to perceive that magnificence at work. Today, it would be enough to start there. Amen.

[All poems and quotations from *Joy* edited by Christian Wiman]