

“An Advent Recipe for Joy” based on Luke 1:46b-55

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It's fitting that today's scriptures are joy-filled. What would an “old fashioned” Christmas be without joyous celebration? Yet our Christmas is not so old. In fact, our Puritan ancestors didn't celebrate Christmas. For Puritans, scripture was the sole basis for worship and practice. Finding no biblical support for Christmas, they rejected its celebration. Even the word was abhorrent to them. Wanting to rid Christianity of all things Catholic, they couldn't bear celebrating “Christ's mass.”

They also frowned on Christmas revelry. To Puritans, this festival of carolling, wassailing, and merry-making exhibited “an extreme forgetfulness of Christ, by giving liberty to carnall and sensual delights.” Eventually, an act of Parliament in so-called “Merrie England” in 1644, outlawed Christmas. Sheriffs ensured that merchants opened for business on Christmas day. Here in New England in 1659, the Massachusetts Bay Colony banned Christmas celebration and its “great dishonor of God and offense to others.” Those caught “observing Christmas, either by forebearing of labor, feasting, or any other way” were fined five shillings.

Christmas celebrations as we know them, with their mix of religious and secular customs, didn't appear until the early 19th century, making them not so “old fashioned” after all. And if the Puritans thought then there wasn't much holy about Christmas, what would they say now that the holiday's commercialized beyond belief? Yet, despite the sentimentality and materialism, I believe that what makes Christmas celebration so irrepressible that neither fines, the law, nor threat of force could extinguish it is the joy at its very heart.

Joy is spoken of eloquently in today's Advent scriptures. Mary shares hers, declaring, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” who “looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. [A]ll generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me.” Isaiah expresses his joy, too: “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall bloom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.” Wilderness, dry land, desert. For Isaiah, the context matters. Happiness, pleasure, fun all depend on positive conditions — good health, good job, happy family, lots of toys. But joy springs forth from challenge, difficulty, or despair, born of the reversal that comes when we don't expect it.

Joy has the quality of serendipity, a term coined by 18th century author Horace Walpole from Serendip, an old name for Sri Lanka, referring to a Persian tale, *The Three Princes of Serendip*, whose heroes “discovered, quite unexpectedly, great, wonderful and good in the most unlikely of situations, places and people.” He describes how the story's princes made surprising discoveries. Joy comes like that, an unexpected gift. Mere happiness can be pursued but joy may only be received.

Mary and Isaiah remind us that joy is a spontaneous experience, not chosen or created. As C. S. Lewis said, joy always surprises. Unbidden and unplanned for, it marks the occurrence of something so good that it not merely meets but exceeds our hopes and expectations. So, really, there is no Advent recipe for joy. Joy can't be manufactured.

But perhaps it can be bought. I've been thinking the price of joy is what we must give up for joy to arise. Didn't the Israelites have to give up their doubt that God would act on their behalf? Didn't the shepherds have to give up their pessimism that God would never come to nobodies like them? Didn't Mary have to give up her objections to God's way of doing things — that it wasn't the right time, the right place, the right partner? Didn't those who expected a messiah king have to accept one who arrived, not with might, but poor and vulnerable?

We have our own price to pay for joy to arise: Our vulnerability. We must give up the skepticism and cynicism that helps keep us from feeling too much and too deeply, shielding us from disappointment and despair. We must offer God our deepest longings for the world's and our own renewal. We must let go of pedestrian worldviews, opening ourselves to the possibility that God can bestow gifts beyond our expectations. And we must cast off the illusion that everything depends on us alone. For the birth of Jesus and Christmas's greatest promise of joy is the story of a God who says, "It doesn't all depend on you. I am here."

That was, after all, the basis of Isaiah's joy — the experience of God at work. Say to those who are fearful, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God." the awareness of God-with-us — that's when the eyes of the blind shall be opened, says Isaiah, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; when the tongues of the speechless sing for joy;" when "they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

Advent joy is linked with the presence of God. The culture tells us to pursue happiness. Advent invites us to receive the gift of the presence of God transforming every circumstance when no lesser power can. The culture suggests we change the situation if we want to be happy. Advent calls us to open our lives to the One who meets us where we are and graces our lives with joy.

Such joy happens when God is present and people know it, which is why it can erupt in a depressed economy, in the middle of a war, in an ICU waiting room, or in a bout with cancer. Such joy changes everything; life's transformed as unexpected, not-to-be-believed possibilities open up. Such joy resides deep in the soul, reverberating, opening the way for more joy by casting out fear and despair. And such joy is essential to be shared if, together, we're to go on in our longing and despair; recalling how God has come to us in the desert moments of our lives, and expectantly yearning for such presence at every moment. In this way, as C.S. Lewis wrote, "We are like people digging channels in a waterless land, in order that when at last the water comes, it may find them ready."

I don't know what five shillings were worth in 1859, but I think I would have risked paying that fine if it meant I might know the joy that only God's arrival can bring. For we sing these carols, make merry, and celebrate Christmas that we might reclaim the deepest source of our joy and to experience it again, that — beyond our hopes — we are not alone and God is with us. The world needs what Christmas celebrates: God's amazing love and the promise of peace on earth, good will among us. May we open ourselves to such joy, knowing its price and paying it willingly.