

Joy Sunday

11 December 2022 – Advent 3

INTRODUCING TODAY'S READINGS ... on Joy Sunday

We've been using the symbol of a rainbow to show the various ways that hope comes to us. In the natural world, we only see a rainbow **after** there has been rain or a storm ... that is, after going through difficult circumstances. Rainbows aren't seen on bright sunny days when life is all going well.

Today we will hear the story of a young woman living a quiet life in a small village in Galilee – no more than 15 years old, maybe as young as twelve or thirteen – whose life is about to be turned completely upside down ... and whose unexpected pregnancy will likely bring shame and trauma to her and her family. Yet despite and in the midst of these potential difficulties, Mary manages to glimpse joy and to sense God's blessing despite her difficult circumstances.

BIBLE READINGS

[Isaiah 35:1-10](#)

The desert and the parched land will be glad;

the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.

Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom;

it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,

the splendour of Carmel and Sharon;

they will see the glory of the Lord,

the splendour of our God.

Strengthen the feeble hands,

steady the knees that give way;

say to those with fearful hearts,

'Be strong, do not fear;

your God will come ...

he will come to save you.'

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened

and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Then will the lame leap like a deer,

and the mute tongue shout for joy.

Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.
The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.
And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.
The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.
No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,
and those the Lord has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

[Luke 1:26-38, 46-55](#)

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.'

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants for ever; his kingdom will never end.'

'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'

The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of

God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.'

'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May your word to me be fulfilled.' Then the angel left her. ...

And later Mary said:

'My soul glorifies the Lord

and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

for the Mighty One has done great things for me –

holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

to Abraham and his descendants for ever,

just as he promised our ancestors.'

MESSAGE

Sometimes we wish for life to change, for God to intervene in dramatic ways to turn things around. Think of the situation in Ukraine.

Or health struggles we or our loved ones face.

Or people we know caught in addiction or domestic violence.

Or the plight of refugees living in limbo in Australia with little hope for a better future.

But so often life seems to just grind on as before, with no change in sight and no hope that any meaningful change will come.

For the Jewish exiles living in Babylon, any hope that earlier prophets had spoken of an end to exile and a return to Jerusalem was tempered by the reality of the long 1200 km trek through the desert. Even if their political masters were persuaded to let them leave, which didn't seem likely, where could they find water on the way? How could they stay safe from bandits and wild animals? I imagine older, wiser voices saying to the exiles that it's all just too hard to contemplate. Better to stay living here in Babylon despite the compromises to our faith.

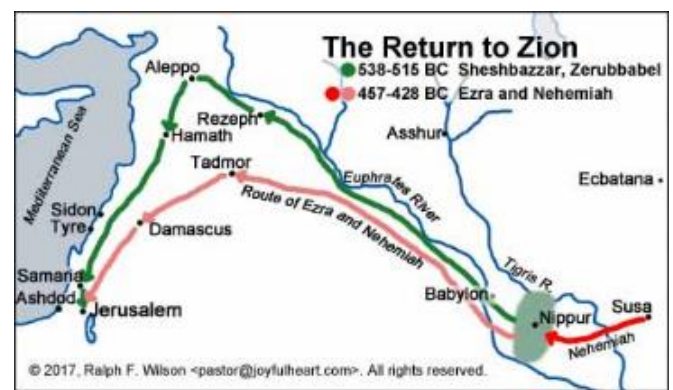
I wonder if there are wilderness areas in your life that you dare not venture into? Fearful places where you've tried to venture before but failed?

Places where your normal resources just won't cut it?

Perhaps a broken relationship or a long discarded dream ... or even hope for the church to be revitalised with lots of young people ...

The good news in Isaiah chapter 35 is that the harshness of the desert wilderness is about to be transformed. God will bring water and springs in the desert, which will bloom with beauty, much like Australian deserts after rain.

Rather than being empty, God's presence will be there to bring healing and new life ... the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will leap for joy ... the harshness of



the wilderness will bring forth **beauty** and **grace**.
It will become a highway leading back to Jerusalem.

God is coming to rescue the exiles and bring them home. Instead of sadness and sorrow there will be gladness, joy and singing. The signs of God's powerful healing presence will be visible for all to see ... just as they were in the ministry of Jesus ... the blind regained their sight, the ears of the deaf were opened, the lame were healed. All these signs pointed to God's inbreaking kingdom ... bringing healing, wholeness, restoration and joy.



In these middle chapters of Isaiah, the prophet assures the people that God is **powerful** enough, **wise** enough and **loving** enough to turn this vision, this possibility, into reality. The question for the people was whether they had **faith** enough to trust in God and to get up and actually leave Babylon and attempt the return journey to Jerusalem.

Similarly for the people in Jesus' day. The evidence was right there in front of them for those with eyes to see, but would they have enough **faith** to put their trust in the prophet from Galilee and follow him?

Perhaps it's similar for us sometimes. We hear the whisper of God's promise but will we have faith to follow?

The story of Mary in Luke 1 has several surprises, starting with the observation that God's great promises – like the ones in the Isaiah reading – can sometimes have a dramatic **personal** impact.

In Mary's case, Gabriel's amazing message uprooted Mary's hope of living a quiet village life married to an honest hard-working man like Joseph.



And yes, Mary may have had hopes for children, but not like this, not with the unwanted stigma of being an unwed mother.

On the positive side, God's promise is staggering! Mary will become the mother of

God's Son, mother of a new King David, one who will reign over an everlasting kingdom! And such a promise being made to a nobody, a woman from an obscure rural village in sleepy Galilee. It's why Mary can later sing that she feels blessed.



Mary's mind, though, quickly moves to **practicalities** ... I'm a virgin, never slept with a man before, how is any of this even remotely possible? I may be a country girl, but I know how babies come about ...

No problem, says Gabriel, God's **power** will overshadow you, the child will be conceived by God's Spirit ... God's word and God's promise will make it happen. I'm suspecting that Mary is not fully convinced, although she has the courage and faith to say 'yes'.

Then, some time later, after visiting her relative Elizabeth, who is also unexpectedly pregnant, Mary sings a song that we know as the **Magnificat**, the opening word of her song in Latin ... *Magnificat anima mea Dominum* ... literally, Glorifies my soul the Lord!



What are we to make of this famous song? How do we imagine Mary?



It's a song of **blessing**, but is often watered down ... just like so much artwork depicting Mary as meek and mild ... with her head angled and eyes downcast ... a demure pale skinned woman who just goes along with whatever God asks of her without question ... **really?!**

Her song is inspired by **prophetic imagination** ... similar to what inspires Isaiah in the other reading ... inspired by God's Spirit, who prompts Mary to give voice to God's vision for a transformed world ... a bold prophetic voice ...



At heart it's a song of **justice** ... a deeply **subversive** song about **radical revolution**, as the rich and powerful are pictured being torn down from their places of privilege while the poor and hungry are lifted up ... try to think how Mary's song might be heard in an African or Middle Eastern context ... and how dangerous it might be to sing these words ...



It's also a song that looks ahead to the **ministry of Jesus**, where **all** will be welcomed ... including many **women** ... from 15 year old Mary to women rejected as **unclean**, those considered **immoral** as well as women of means and influence. All these women will have a place among the followers of Jesus.

Finally, it's a song of great and wild **joy** ... that makes no sense from a logical or reasoned point of view ... yet which celebrates what **God** is hoping for, what **God** is wanting to happen ... what the world will look like when hope and peace and love reign.



We've heard this song many times, at least once during Advent each year.

The challenge for us is to hear the freshness and hope in Mary's words.

Will we be people like Mary who say 'yes' to God, despite feeling **vulnerable** and **anxious**, despite wondering whether we are **worthy** to do anything worthwhile for God, who have **questions**, who feel **weak** ... yet who **trust** in God's goodness and promises to be with us.

The hope of Christmas, then, is not a romantic golden light with haloes around the heads of Mary and Jesus, with gently falling snow and a continuing of the status quo.

Rather, it's the start of a **joyful revolution** that God wants to bring ... not just in people's hearts but also in our day-to-day life in the world.

It's a call to **justice** and a call to **change**.

It's an inspiring call to people shivering in cold and fear in Ukraine or for people wondering how to put food on the table.

But it's also an uncomfortable vision for anyone who is rich or powerful or who

wants things to stay just as they are. We have been warned.

Our next song picks up these ideas by suggesting that God is about to act to turn the world around. It's called **Canticle of the turning**.

SONGS Canticle of the turning

My soul cries out with a joyful shout
that the God of my heart is great,
and my spirit sings of the wondrous things
that you bring to the ones who wait.
You fixed your sight on your servant's plight,
and my weakness you did not spurn,
so from east to west shall my name be blest.

Could the world be about to turn?

My heart shall sing of the day you bring.

Let the fires of your justice burn.

*Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near,
and the world is about to turn!*

Though I am small, my God, my all,
you work great things in me,
and your mercy will last from the depths
of the past to the end of the age to be.
Your very name puts the proud to shame,
and to those who would for you yearn,
you will show your might, put the strong to flight,
for the world is about to turn.

Refrain

From the halls of power to the fortress tower,
not a stone will be left on stone.
Let the king beware for your justice tears
ev'ry tyrant from his throne.
The hungry poor shall weep no more,
for the food they can never earn;
there are tables spread, ev'ry mouth be fed,
for the world is about to turn.

Refrain

Though the nations rage from age to age,
we remember who holds us fast;
God's mercy must deliver us
from the conqueror's crushing grasp.
This saving word that our forebears heard
is the promise which holds us bound,
'til the spear and rod can be crushed by God,
who is turning the world around.

Refrain

Words Rory Cooney © 1990 GIA Publications. All rights reserved. Used with permission.