

Keepers of Joy ©

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel
On December 11, 2016 at The North Parish of North Andover, Unitarian Universalist
Third Sunday of Advent

“Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning.” – Psalm 30:5

*“There must be always remaining in every life, some place for the singing of angels,
some place for that which- in itself- is breathless and beautiful.” – The Rev. Howard Thurman*

If you are having a hard time getting into the Christmas spirit this year,
I recommend listening to Santa Larry.

For those who haven't heard of him, Santa Larry is the Santa
who was chosen to listen to kids' dreams at the Mall of America this year.

He told his story on public radio this week.

Oh, he had a great time at the Mall of America. He *loves* being Santa,
the kids were loving Santa, he was treated like royalty.

Minnesota is *nice*, he said. (*Can I get a witness- anyone here from the Midwest?*)

Well, he had a great time.

But the reason why Santa Larry was on public radio wasn't so nice.

After some photos of him went up on social media,
there was a huge and hateful online backlash against him.

Santa Larry is a retired Army Captain raised in Nashville, Arkansas.

He is also African-American... and a whole bunch of haters went online
to insist that Santa is white.

That's right. Just like Jesus.

Thankfully, Santa Larry got the last word, because he got to tell his story.

When he was a kid, he says that it was almost *mystical*,
how Santa would come to his house and put presents under his tree.

When he was 11, he was invited to help Santa out—
to help put presents under the tree for his siblings and nieces.
He says, “To see that joy and excitement on their faces- it was unbelievable. I loved it!”

Skip forward a couple decades, and he found out his nephews
weren’t going to go see Santa one year.

So he bought a Santa suit for \$29.99 at Walmart, put it on, and thought, “This is *fun!*”

He went over to his brother’s house, knocked on the door.

It opened, and there were three little boys in their pajamas.

He says “They freaked out! Saying “Oh, my gosh it’s Santa Claus!”

He gave them some presents... and then he disappeared.

After he left, his sister-in-law called
and said she’d asked the boys if they knew who it was.

They said, “Yeah, mama, it was Santa Claus. *It was Santa Claus!*”

Santa Larry said, “It made me feel so good.” And I tell you, his joy was catching.

Just listening to Santa Larry talk about the joy of bringing kids joy
made me break out in laughter and a huge grin.

Yes, I thought, thank you Santa Larry, for reminding me of the spirit of Christmas.

We humans are joyful beings.

You could say we are born to feel joy.

It’s one of those emotions innate to being human,

one we lift up collectively in song, art, worship and dance.

We want our kids and loved ones to feel joy, to laugh and smile.

For them, we want joy, not sadness, to be the norm.

I’d argue that many animals are joyful beings too.

Just look at a dog running or playing, a dolphin leaping clear of the water,

a hawk soaring, a horse galloping- expressing the joyful freedom of their bodies
and doing what they are meant to do.

It seems that *in* us and in other creatures, life has unfolded in such a way

that it seeks joy, hungers for joy, loves to express joy.

Some might put it this way: *God wants us to be joyful.*

Some might say that the Spirit of Life,

the creative life energy *within our very bodies* wants us to feel joy.

Some might say that joy is a reminder that we are each called to *abundant life*.

Of course, life is not *always* abundant or joyful.

Individuals, societies and our brother and sister creatures often suffer and sometimes despair.

Sometimes it's external forces or fate that conspires to take our joy from us--

the brutalities or violence, the numbing or deadening aspects of life in human society.

Sometimes joy leaves us due to exhaustion, isolation or loneliness,

fear or grief, or simply the biological, chemical imbalances that cause depression.

Sometimes joy eludes us because we've been thwarted in a life goal,

or are worried about any number of things- money, safety, our family members.

Sometimes it eludes us because we're surrounded by folks

who bring us down instead of lift us up...

or because as we get older we stop seeking joy out.

Sometimes joy leaves us because we feel the pain of the world, the weight of the world on our shoulders.

The Germans even have a word for that: *Weltschmerz*.

It's hard to feel joy when you have *weltschmerz*!

(You might want to write that word down for one of those hard days:

"Honey, I'm sorry, I'm just *weltschmerz* today.")

It can also be hard to feel joy when you're grieving someone you love.

In fact, when you're mourning it's not uncommon to feel at times

like you'll never feel joy again.

And then, when you *do* feel it- it's not uncommon to feel *guilty* about it,

or *alarmed* by it, as if it's a sign that your grieving is over.

Don't worry; it's probably not.

The joy is just a sign that you're coming up for air.

As the writer Jan Richardson says, joy can be elusive-
even in and sometimes *especially* in this season.

So, just as I asked you last week to reflect on what it is that brings you peace,
today, I ask, what is it that brings you joy?

How might we make a habit, a practice, of seeking and expressing joy?
What brings us joy, even those of us who are really stressed out,
or battling seasonal depression?

What brings us joy, even those of us who are skeptical, curmudgeonly,
or find themselves in the midst of hardship, fear or anxiety, grief or lament?

The Nativity story is a story about finding joy in the midst of such things.
It takes place at a time of unrest, instability, violence, executions and oppression.
It takes place at a time when extremist religious sects
were springing up in response to the Roman imposition of power.
They were hard times- times of lament, grief, hardship, fear and anxiety.

Now, as those of you who've been coming here a while know,
I consider the Nativity to be- not an eyewitness account-
but a story-length metaphor that offers us archetypes and meaning.
You also know that when we speak of the Nativity, it always helps to clarify
which version we're talking about—the one in Matthew, or the one in Luke.

In **Matthew**, the focus is on **Joseph and his dreams**,
in which angels tell him what to do.
There are **wise men** who visit and an escape to Egypt,
following Moses' steps but in reverse.

In Luke, we hear about **Elizabeth and Mary**
and the **angels come in person**, not in dreams.
There are **shepherds** who come to visit and there's a manger in Bethlehem.

The Luke Nativity includes the story I told to the children this morning, with the angel Gabriel visiting Zechariah before he visits Mary.

There are many parallels in the interwoven stories of Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary.

In both cases, the women are unlikely candidates for pregnancy.

Elizabeth is too old, and Mary is a young woman, a maiden- in Hebrew, the word is "*almah*" - which the Greeks later translated as virgin.

That translation has led to a lot of interesting theology.

In both cases, the angel Gabriel comes to announce the news and gives the future children their names.

In both cases, the angel inspires fear and confusion.

Both Zechariah and Mary question the news he brings.

But only Zechariah is struck mute.

Here's the story: *(Luke 1:12-14, 1:18)*

"When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him.

But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.

Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.

You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,

for he will be great in the sight of the Lord."

... Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so?

For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years."

The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.

But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

Here's one way of thinking about all that:

Don't be skeptical when angels tell you good news.

Things go better for Mary.

Here's her story, a few paragraphs later, with which you might be more familiar:

Gabriel has just greeted her and we read: *(Luke 1:29-31, 34)*

"...she was much perplexed by his words

and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

And how, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,

and you will name him Jesus.

...Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin,(a maiden)?"

Now, for some reason, Gabriel isn't bothered by Mary's skepticism.

He doesn't strike her mute. He just says a bit more about her future child.

He also tells her that her cousin Elizabeth is 6 months pregnant.

So after Gabriel leaves, Mary high-tails it to Elizabeth's house.

And here is where the joy comes in:

*"..Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,
where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.*

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb.

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry,

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?

For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy."

There are lots of theological understandings of this scene,

but what I love about it is not theological,

but how it captures a human moment of joy- and not only that,

but a moment of joy between two women.

In general, women get less press in the Bible than men.

So here we have two women, cousins, both unexpectedly pregnant, greeting each other.

There is no judgment, no need for explanation,
no need to say, "I know it's crazy that I'm pregnant, since I'm so old and at some risk,"
or "I know it's crazy that I'm pregnant, since I'm so young...
and don't have a husband and am at great risk."

No judgment, no explanation- not even anxiety or fear.

There is only homecoming. There is only welcome. There is only joy.

The connection between Elizabeth and Mary is immediate and embodied.
Their joy is physical-- and in Elizabeth's case,
it is even translated to the baby in her womb who leaps for joy.

The baby in her womb leaps for joy.

What a particular and peculiar, odd and remarkable, wild and crazy feeling it is
when that happens- when a child moves greatly in the womb.

(Can I get a witness?)

Some might say that moments of a mother's heightened emotion
are often reflected by a baby in the womb.

That part of the story doesn't seem theological to me.

It seems rather biological, and very human.

When the story continues, all the action stops, the dialogue stops.
Far from mute, Mary opens up her heart and her mouth and breaks into song.
It begins with these words:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..."

My soul magnifies. My spirit rejoices.

Here is Mary.

Young and pregnant and unwed, in a society where that brings shame and ruin.
Female, in a society where men come first and women have little standing.
Poor, in a society that does not care much about the poor.
Jewish, in a society that restricts, terrorizes and kills the members of minority religions.
Ordinary, in a society where the all-powerful corrupt the less powerful.

Ordinary- *but not powerless.*

Not silenced, not voiceless, not consumed by fear or rage or depression.

Mary has the power of joy within her; she has the power to sing.

Filled with the holy spirit, filled with joy, she sings.

Her heart overflows, her spirit rejoices.

As she greets her cousin, they reflect and magnify each other's joy.

They magnify the glory of life and love in body and soul.

Creative power, the power of life stirs within them,
it courses through their veins and is sheltered in their bodies.

They are co-creators with a power beyond knowing,
the power of life, the Creative Energy of the Universe, the energy of God.

And in *this* moment, this moment of joy and awakening,
Mary has a revolutionary vision.

She offers a vision of *absolute clarity* of the world as it should be
and joy that is yet to come.

Mary sings about a God who has scattered the proud,
brought down the powerful from their thrones and sent the rich away empty,
a God who has lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things.
This is a song about reversals of power,
about a society where the unjust social order has been overturned.

In the midst of a world in which *only* the rich, proud and powerful sit on thrones,
a world where the lowly are *not* lifted up and the hungry are *not* filled, Mary sings.
At a time when she is terribly vulnerable,
at risk of being shamed and rejected by society, she sings.
Instead of falling into despair at the huge gap
between how the world is and how she knows it should be, she sings.

She doesn't let the Roman haters take away her joy or her vision,
her certainty of how the world should be.
She shares it with the world.

Mary invites us to be like her.

We, too, may be keenly aware of the injustices of the world,
the imbalances of power, the suffering of our fellow beings, our own life troubles.
It can all get overwhelming at times.

Mary's story reminds us to seek each other out. To find your people.
To welcome each other like you've just come a long way
and share something very precious.
To greet each other with joy, and announce your joy to the world.

Mary's story says: Do not fall prey to feeling powerless. Do not be silenced.
Remember that you reflect and magnify the glory of life,
the glory of Creation, of God, of the life energy of all the Earth.
You reflect and magnify it body and soul.
Remember that creative power is stirring within you.
Let other people know.

Mother Teresa once said, "One filled with joy preaches without preaching."
If we want to magnify our good work in the world,
if we want to bring others into our fold, one way to do it is through joy-
our own and others.
Yes, there is space here for lament and grief and despair and anger,
but we are also keepers of joy- not just for our own sake,
but because it is needed in the world.

Joy is contagious and attractive. It is also a form of resistance.
Joy is a way to invite others to join us in building collective, creative power,
to join us in creating something out of nothing,
in becoming a beacon of light in the darkness,
a powerhouse of love in the midst of apathy or evil or hate.
Because that's what we're called to be: A powerhouse of love.
(Can I get an amen? Amen!)

As one of my mentors in ministry, the Rabbi Edwin Friedman, used to say,
“One thing the Devil can’t STAND is enthusiasm!”

So let’s hear it-- are we a Powerhouse of Love? *(Yes!)*

Whether its Mother Mary or Santa Larry who inspires you,
I encourage you in this next week to try out a habit, a practice of joy.
If you find yourself walking around in a funk, feeling grim or harried or in despair,
see what happens when you think of yourself as a secret Keeper of Joy.

It might happen when you bring in gifts for the Mitten Tree,
or bring your kids to the carol sing, or sing in the concert.
It might happen when you reach out to a friend,
give a gift to a stranger, smile at a store clerk,
or pause to just appreciate the present moment, and the glory of life all around us.
When you keep joy, you reflect that glory, you engage in resistance,
and refuse to let the haters get you down.

I learned another new German word this week, *Handschuhschneeballwerfer*.
It refers to a coward willing to criticize and abuse from a safe distance.
It came to mind when I heard about the people telling Santa Larry he shouldn’t exist.
I decided those people are all *handschuhschneeballwerfer*.
It is so clear that Santa Larry is an absolute blessing,
so full is he with tidings of great joy.

At the end of the interview with Santa Larry,
the interviewer said, “Santa Larry, it sounds like you’ve found your calling in life.”
He said “*That’s* what my friends tell me...
despite what the mean-spirited Grinch people are saying online.
They’re going to get coal- ho, ho, ho, ho, ho- for sure!”

Thank you, Santa Larry, and Mother Mary, for all the joy. Amen.

Reading: *For Joy* by Jan Richardson

You can prepare,
but still it will come to you by surprise,
crossing through your doorway,
calling your name in greeting,
turning like a child who quickens suddenly within you.
It will astonish you how wide your heart will open in welcome
for the joy that finds you so ready
and still so unprepared.

Words for Meditation: *Blessing to Summon Rejoicing* from Circle of Grace, by Jan Richardson

When your weeping has watered the earth.
When the storm has been long- and the night-
and the season of your sorrowing.
When you have seemed an exile from your own life,
lost in the far country, a long way from where your comfort lies.
(When the sound of splintering and fracture haunts you.)
When despair attends you.
When lack. When trouble.
When fear. When pain.
When empty. When lonely.
When too much of what depletes you
and not enough of what restores and rests you.
 Then let there be rejoicing.
 Then let there be dreaming.
 Let there be laughter in your mouth
 and on your tongue shouts of joy.
 Let the seeds stoked by tears turn to grain, to bread, to feasting.
 Let there be coming home.