

TEXT: Luke 1:39-45
THEME: Joy is the lifeblood of being
SUBJECT: Experiences of joy
TITLE: Joy

Fourth Sunday of Advent
23 December 2018
Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

Sarah Lindsey slices ripe white peaches into a Tony the Tiger bowl, dropping slivers for the dog poised by her foot to stop their fall. She feels the plashing of blunt soft wings inside her trying to escape again.

For Mary Karr joy arrives in the body but it doesn't originate there. Kids on a little league diamond in full summer, idly tossing their mitts into the air; the visual burst of color in a Basquiat (bahss-key-ah) painting of an angel in Everlast boxing shorts at the Brooklyn Museum; her teenage son at night in the dead of winter burying their kitten in a shoebox so Mary wouldn't have to see the kitten ruined by the car that hit her - his flushed face breaking the news to her - a grief countered by radical joy at his sudden maturity.

Donald Hall remembering his wife Jane in June's high light, standing by the kitchen sink with a glass of wine, listening to the bobolink, crushing garlic in the late sunshine. He watches her cooking from his chair. She presses her lips together and tastes the sauce from her fingertips. "It's ready now. Come on," she said. "You light the candle." He did. "We ate," he says, "and talked and went to bed, and slept. It was a miracle."

Christian Wiman finds Merriam-Webster's definition of joy less than satisfying. If you are trying to understand why a moment of joy can blast you right out of the life to which it makes you all the more lovingly attached, or why this lift into pure bliss might also entail a steep drop into loss, or how in the midst of great grief some fugitive or inexplicable joy might, like a tiny flower in a land of ash, bloom - well, in these cases the dictionary is useless.

Joy: that durable, inexhaustible, essential, inadequate word. That something in the soul that makes one able to claim again the word "soul." That sensation more exalting than happiness, less graspable than hope, that seed of being that can bud in ice, so that faith suddenly is not something one need contemplate, struggle for, or even "have," but is simply there, as the world is there.

There is no way to plan for, much less conjure, such an experience. One can only try to make oneself fit to feel the moment when it comes, and let it carry you where it will. Lucille Clifton describes how she makes herself fit for the moment: ". . . when I wake to the heat of 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."

In our time it is fashionable, especially for those of us who live on the dark side of the moon, to paint everything first in its darkest colors. The darkness becomes so

absorbing that we never reach the color and light. To concentrate exclusively on the negative makes us feel powerless and victimized.

There is so much beauty and goodness in the world, it is only fair to underline the joy that is in creation, too. John O'Donohue reminds us joy is a dignified presence; if we insist on being morose and depressed, joy will not interrupt us.

Joy is hidden at the heart of ordinary things - slicing white peaches into a Tony the Tiger bowl, kids tossing their mitts into the air, lighting a candle - as well as in significant things - pregnancy, the smell of an infant in arms, a marriage, a hundredth birthday.

If your heart loves delight, O'Donohue says, you will always be able to discover the quiet joy that awaits to shine forth in many situations. To make injustice and its concomitant suffering the only measure of our attention is to praise the Devil.

Joy is the only inoculation against the despair to which any sane person is prone. Joy is the lifeblood of being. In Richard Wilbur's words, "Joy's trick it to supply dry lips with what can cool and slake, leaving them dumbstruck also with an ache nothing can satisfy."

In this world of multiverses and quantum weirdness, where ninety-five percent of matter and energy we know only to name as "dark," it is obvious that reality extends far beyond what our five senses can perceive. So what in the world, or beyond the world, Wiman wants to know, is calling us when we are called to joy?

Mary, beating a hasty retreat from her home village when she discovers she is pregnant, seeking refuge with family in a distant village, is not rejoicing because her life is going according to plan. It isn't. Her life is plunged into confusion and chaos. Mary's experience, creative in nature, perplexing beyond explanation, leaves her seeking shelter and a measure of security.

Elizabeth's compassionate hospitality creates the space Mary needs to make sense of her experience. The child in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy in the presence of the child in Mary's womb. A moment of joy is, or at least leads to, a moment of comprehension. Joy helps us see into the nature of things. Even if only for a moment, joy makes life something that can be understood.

Before Mary can rejoice, Elizabeth must rejoice in her. Before Mary can sing her social, economic, and politically revolutionary song, Elizabeth must sing Mary's praise. Want to give a Christmas present that will change or even save someone's life? Rejoice in them. Sing their praise. Be a compassionate presence that allows them to glimpse meaning in the midst of confusion, to know joy in the midst of chaos.