

**Advent 3: Joy in the Midst of Despair – Rev. Janice Reynolds
Isaiah 12:2-6 and Luke 1: 28-48**

**December 11, 2016
First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael**

Please Call Me by My True Names (Excerpts) By Thich Nhat Hanh

Don't say that I will depart tomorrow --
even today I am still arriving.
I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
to fear and to hope.
The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river.
And I am the bird that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.

I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,
throwing myself in the water to escape a pirate.
And I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.

My joy is like Spring, so warm it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears, so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names, so I can hear all my cries and my laughter at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart can be left open,
the door of compassion.

Joy in the Midst of Despair

Rev. Janice Reynolds

You probably can remember the time when you received surprising news... who hasn't? A time when your place in the world was upended? For a moment, you are all alone in your shock... stunned by the new reality of your situation.

In Marin, someone might pick up the phone and hear from their landlord "we're selling your rental, so you have to move." Or from a boss... "We've downsizing your job." Or there are the phone calls we never hope to receive, beyond comprehension, but when it comes, our heart sinks, we have to catch our breath.

What if your hometown neighborhood is being bombarded with shells, and you know it is finally time to leave as quickly as possible, with a few clothes and food - just what you can carry - and you take your children's hands and walk out the door.

When someone is very vulnerable, any change is very difficult. We can imagine what it would have been like for Mary to receive the news that she was pregnant.

Luke is the only gospel in which Mary's story appears, and in this account there is nothing submissive or immature about Mary.

The Angel approached her with words of great honor: *Hail Mary, full of grace*. Yet Mary is shocked and surprised by the angel... and who wouldn't be? This angel was telling her news that was beyond belief, and at first, she questioned it. *What sort of greeting is this?* she asked. And the angel obliged her with an explanation. Later, she challenged the angel again: *How shall this happen to me, when I have no husband?* God chose a spirited young woman, not a passive girl.

The longer story includes Mary's visit to Elizabeth. What we may not read into this story, is that Mary may have needed a place to stay. She was now a pregnant unmarried woman, a dangerous condition to be in.

When Elizabeth sees Mary, she is filled with the Holy Spirit and she proclaims what Mary has not yet told her, and what is not yet visible: Mary is pregnant. Through the Spirit, Elizabeth knows who Mary's child will be, for she calls Mary "the mother of my God."

The Spirit of God speaks through Gabriel and also through Elizabeth to Mary. They verify the news that Mary carries the Spirit of God inside her... that Mary will bear a child who will change forever the way the world thinks about how we treat one another, how we love one another.

And Mary recognizes that she is blessed; even in her vulnerability, she recognizes how important this moment is. She seems to fully comprehend that even with all the inconvenience

and even the peril this news brings to her, she will be the conduit for God's grace and love to enter this world fully. Mary the peasant girl believed in the promise of God, and her trust in God's word opened the door for God to bless the whole world through her.

We become aware of the strength of Mary, the valiant heart of Mary, and the spirit within her that transcends despair into joy. Mary sings about how blessed she is, the elevation she has experienced because she is seen so in God's eyes. Her social condition has been reversed because of God's blessing alone.

Mary is blessed because despite all expectations she will be honored rather than shamed for bearing this child. And she has also been blessed with divine joy – because she has believed that God can do what God promises to do. Elizabeth celebrates Mary's willingness to say "yes" to God.

Judith Jones, a professor of religion, has some further ideas about Elizabeth: Elizabeth continues the pattern of social reversal by opening her arms and her home to a relative whom her neighbors would expect her to reject. Instead of shaming Mary, she welcomes, blesses, and celebrates her, treating her as more honorable than herself. Thus, the pregnancy that might have brought Mary shame brings joy and honor instead.

When Elizabeth welcomes Mary, she practices the same kind of inclusive love that Jesus will show to prostitutes and sinners.ⁱ She sees beyond the shameful of Mary's situation to the reality of God's love at work even among those whom society rejects and excludes.

Elizabeth's words and actions invite us to reflect on our own openness to the ways that God chooses to act in our world. What is God doing through unexpected people in our society today? Where is God at work through people whom our neighbors often exclude or treat as shameful or who we turn our own eyes away from? Will we listen to the Spirit's prompting when the bearers of God's new reality show up on our doorstep?

Meister Eckhart, 13th c. German mystic said, "*We are all called to be mothers of God – for God is always waiting to be born.*" We learn from Mary that our lives are also conduits for new life at every turning.

Elizabeth does what women have done through the ages; she celebrates the good news and then accompanies Mary in a vulnerable and dangerous time. She shares the joy that can be shared, even within a circumstance that may have seemed despairing.

The most vulnerable people in our day continue to be women with children... particularly young women who find themselves pregnant, or who care for children. Women around our world today valiantly seek to make a better world for one another, bringing new life into every difficult circumstance and supporting one another. And of course, thank God there are good men who also accompany and support women through their lives.

In a moment, you will see a photo of a Syrian woman, Amal, who is one of the more than 4 million refugees and displaced people struggling to rebuild their lives in Iraq. Displaced for months or years, women refugees face challenges that threaten their basic security, economic well-being, and survival. Women are targets of sexual harassment and gender-based violence in their families, camps, and host communities. They struggle to earn money to support their families. Many say they are hungry. They have survived extreme trauma and stress, and they are ready to move forward.

An organization called Women for Women International helps Syrian women who have been forced to flee to northern Iraq because of conflict and war. Women for Women International works with local organizations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to reach the most vulnerable women in need of support, including those suffering severe emotional trauma, at high risk of violence, and living in extreme poverty.

Women for Women offers life and business skills training to 3,000 Syrian women to help them overcome trauma and find the resources needed to rebuild their lives. They also provide safe spaces to enable women to share their experiences and draw strength and confidence from one another – this makes all the difference. For the many women who are widows and heads of household, training in business and vocational skills gives them a path forward to provide for their families.

Young women with small children in our own Marin county struggle to feed and clothe their children. They struggle to stay housed in a county with such high rent. For 10 years, Teresa Ashby, has gathered women and their children for community support. Now they meet in our church each Friday. Leslie will tell you more about how you can support this partnership.

Deborah sang these beautiful words in the anthem today:

And I will be like Mother Mary
With a blessing in my soul
And I will give the world my eyes
So they can see.
And I will be like Mother Mary
With a blessing in my soul
And the future of the world inside of me.

May we, like Elizabeth and Mary, trust that God's Spirit is within us, bringing from within us a new future for ourselves and others who deserve a reversal of their fortunes.

And there will be great joy that will overcome all despair.

¹ Judith Jones, *Professor of Religion; Wartburg College and St. Andrews Episcopal Church*
http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2723

