Joy as Faithful Resistance

Friends, I have two questions for you as we enter together into this time of reflection. I invite you to close your eyes if you're comfortable doing so.

- First, do you consider yourself to be a joyful person?
- And, second, how did your body and mind respond to being asked if you are a joyful person?

Keeping your eyes closed to rest for a moment longer, let's be together in prayer. Holy, loving Spirit – we pray that you would pour out your power among us. We are grateful for our freedom to gather this morning – by live stream and on this land loved by First Nations and others across time. Grant us wisdom enough to recognize, share and grow in our experiences of joy. We ask this as disciples of Jesus. Amen. I welcome you to open your eyes if you wish.

Friends, I wonder if any of these resonate with your response to the question of whether or not you consider yourself a joyful person:

- Absolutely! We all have hard moments, but experience joy every day.
- Or… Hhmmm… I suppose I feel joyful some of the time. Life is busy, though, so I lose track of what brings me joy.
- Or… No, not really. I do feel gratitude. But my experience is more serious and painful than joyful.

Is joy the same as happiness? Happiness is a state of well-being or satisfaction that comes from a convergence of a sense of purpose with a mix of positive emotions (joy among them).

Joy is delight or great pleasure. Joy is powerful and intense. It can show up as a momentary inward feeling or an outward expression. It can also develop into a way of being in the world. Joy can spur us to action. Joy can prepare us to receive who and what comes our way. Joy is open and vulnerable - not guarded or armored.

In our opening words from a neighbor for this morning, I wonder if you noticed the incomplete thought. Author Loryn Brantz states that love resists hate, faith resists fear, education resists misinformation, and community resists poor leadership. *"In a time like this,"* she writes, *"joy is an act of resistance."* What is joy resisting? I ran a search for opposites of joy as, wondering what the poet might name as the forces at play in this time in which we live. I would say that these four fit fairly well: misery, anguish, gloom, despondency.

What might we learn from the joy demonstrated by Mary and Elizabeth in today's gospel reading? These two women would have been well acquainted with the forces affecting so many lives today (misery, anguish, gloom, despondency). This is because greed and oppression were as common 2,000 years ago as they are today. Taking care of me and mine regardless of the effects on anyone else is, well, nothing new.

The Roman army had been occupying their region for about sixty-five years by the time of Jesus' birth. If Jesus had lived to around the age of 70, he would have witnessed the siege on Jerusalem and the total destruction of their temple. Ceasar's army did great harm to the Judean people – squeezing them through exorbitant taxation, raiding homes, raping women, killing people and animals, stealing property. It sounds too familiar. The army's trail of destruction sounds much like what happens in many spaces today – both among our local neighbors and our global neighbors, nearby and far away.

How did Mary and Elizabeth still tap into joy? Soon after Mary experienced the Angel Gabriel visiting her with the news that she would become mother to a powerful child, we heard "*Mary set out and hurried to the hill country… where she entered Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth."* Mary found joy in the recognition that there was work to which she was called. The angel had told Mary that her elder cousin, Elizabeth, would also raise a child.

Mary's joy stemmed from a new sense of purpose and led to her reach out to build solidarity.

I wonder: Might you resist fear and find increased strength and joy in a purpose about which you care deeply by reaching out for companionship in the challenges that face you? We can follow Mary's lead.

Yesterday, I attended a gathering called Light in the Darkness as pastor with St. Croix United Church. I was gathered with 5,000 faith-based organizing neighbors for a statewide summit of two organizations called ISAIAH and Faith in Minnesota. And I felt the energy of joyful power in the Minneapolis Convention Center! We are Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, and of other affiliations.

Here was the premise of why we needed to joyfully gather. *"We are living through a storm. Every day our communities are experiencing pain,"* Isaiah and Faith in Minnesota write:

- The deployment of militarized national guard in cities across the country

- The targeting of entire communities by immigration agents; the abduction of family members by masked officers

- Gutting health care and food assistance

- Dismantling of our public education department

- The basic necessities in our lives becoming less and less affordable"

What are we about?

"The People's Agenda: Dignity and Affordability for All:

- AFFORDABILITY: Lower costs for families and provide universal and lifelong access to care

- DIGNITY: Build a multiracial democracy that honors every person's dignity

- COMMUNITY: Prioritize the quality of life of people and well-being of our communities over corporate profits."

I could feel the joyful energy swelling as Gwen Elliot spoke from one group within ISAIAH. The group is called the Manufactured Homes Residents Collective (representing 30 manufactured home parks throughout the state of Minnesota).

She said, *"The way out of despair is knowing what in your life is worth fighting for. What is the choice you have to make," she asked, "to choose agency over despair and to be a light in darkness?"*

Elizabeth had grieved and was still grieving deeply the dream she had of having children. She must have remained open to the possibilities unfolding in her life to nurture community anyway.

In her poem "Let Joy Be Your Resistance," Breanna Lowman writes:

"We have mourned
And will continue to mourn
But may we choose
Not to lose everything

The rhythm of change
Causes me to sing
My heart to leap
With the possibilities
Of a new tomorrow"

I wonder: Might each of us resist despair by opening ourselves to new opportunities that are calling our names – calling us toward joy?

Mary's joy was so great once shared with her kinswoman that it could not be contained. We will hear and share in it in sung form in moments. We heard as it was written down:

"Your mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear you." (meaning, those who honor the great loving power of our God).

You have shown strength with your arm;
you have scattered the proud in their conceit;
you have deposed the mighty from their thrones
and raised the lowly to high places."

We may not see the fulfillment of Mary's song every day. But we look for the moments when that joyful power breaks through.

We need joy to resist so much else that surrounds us. I invite you to close your eyes for these lyrics form a beloved song that the boys and I often listen to in the car. And I would encourage you, if you need some joy in this difficult season, to find it. It has an amazing drumbeat that I think will bring you joy. It is called "It's Gonna Be OK." I'll read a part of it to you.

"Doubt is a broken record that plays inside my head
I try to turn it down, but I can't quite drown it out
I'm tortured every day, these never-ending worries, pulling on my sleeves

So many times now I was supposed to tap out
All the walls would fall down around me
All anybody would tell me is all that bad news how it's gonna fall through
But no matter what they say or what they say

It's gonna be, gonna be, okay (a, a, a, ay)
It's gonna be, gonna be, okay (a, a, a, ay)
No matter what you've been through here you are
No matter if you think you're falling apart
It's gonna be, okay

And there is a battle raging in your heart but you must win
It comes for all of us, saying we are not enough
So fight for your life the world's gonna try
To sell you some lies"

But it's gonna be ok, friends. Each day we need to find the moments and help one another find the moments when enough joy breaks in that it can be ok in the midst of difficulty.

So what will you go out and resist today with joyful energy?

Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Luke 1:39-55, "Let Joy Be Your Resistance"