

Believe it

Luke 1:39-56

December 18, 2011

While I was in seminary, doing graduate studies in preparation for ministry, I took a May term course entitled, "Wilderness Training for Christian Maturity." The class was co-taught by Gerry Hartis, a seminary graduate and wilderness guide, and my father, a seminary professor and avid outdoorsman.

The crux of the class was a two-week backpacking adventure in the Adirondack Mountains in upstate New York. The wilderness served as a laboratory for us, testing and honing our skills for leadership, for managing groups, and for coping with stress. Or should I say, coping with fear! Because, for some of us, probably for most of us, there came at some point during those two weeks a moment when we came face to face with real fear.

That moment came at different times for different people. For me, the moment came when we hiked to the top of a one hundred fifty-foot cliff and prepared to rappel down the face of the cliff. You see, I have acrophobia, a fear of heights, and this would be the first time I had ever done or even thought of doing such a crazy thing!

Now I love to rappel. I have rappelled a three-hundred foot overhung cliff where I lowered myself on the rope for the last two hundred feet in midair, but then I was terrified, sitting well back from the cliff edge, hanging tightly onto a little pine tree. It took everything I had, and a lot I didn't know I had, to take that first step backward over the edge of the cliff.

For a classmate of mine, a young woman, that part came easy. It was the solo that frightened her. Each of us was guided to a remote location where we were to spend forty-eight hours alone with a sleeping bag and a plastic tarp and little else: no food, no other shelter, and nobody.

It wasn't the being in the woods in the dark with who knows what else that scared her. It wasn't the two days of fasting that worried her. It was being alone. She was terrified of being alone.

That didn't bother me. I enjoyed that experience. I had no problem being alone for forty-eight hours. I wouldn't have any problem being alone, entirely alone, for forty-eight days. But for always? No ...

I enjoy being alone -- for a while -- but the richest, the most joyful, experiences of my life have always been shared. One of my most memorable and joyful experiences was the seventeen days I spent in Scotland as part of my sabbatical three years ago, but there is absolutely no way it would have been as memorable or joyful or meaningful if I had not shared it with Lynne. It was our experience, something we saw and tasted and celebrated together, something we hold now and treasure now as a shared memory. I enjoy hiking alone, and I hiked a mountain alone in Scotland, but that experience too only became complete when I could show Lynne the photographs and tell her the stories.

We are made, we are made by our creator, all of us, to share life together. Our personal identities are inextricably intertwined. I will say it: we have no identity apart from our relationships. Who I am is all bound up -- genetically and emotionally and materially and spiritually, for better or for worse -- with my parents, with my children, with my friends, with you, and with people I hardly know but whose destinies are entwined with mine, simply because we share the same earth, because we face the same challenges, because we share the same hopes and fears, and because we are loved, alike, by the same God.

Life is not a solitary adventure. And hope and peace and love and joy are not individual experiences. We light candles to celebrate our hope, our peace, our love, our joy. Joy, the deepest joy, is always shared. It is our joy, and if we listen carefully to the gospel, we will begin to realize just how big that "our" is!

Luke's gospel tells us that soon after she received the news of her impending pregnancy, Mary traveled to visit her relative Elizabeth who was in the sixth month of her own pregnancy. Elizabeth welcomed Mary with this greeting:

*You are the most blessed of all women,
and blessed is the child you will bear!
How happy you are to believe
that the Lord's message to you will come true!*

Mary's joy is Elizabeth's joy, and Elizabeth's joy is Mary's joy. And they are joyful together because? Because Mary is pregnant? Under normal circumstances that might well be true, but Mary was pregnant under most unusual circumstances, young and unmarried and a virgin. No, Elizabeth's greeting makes it clear that joy comes, not from the events themselves that befall us, but from what we believe about the meaning of those events. Joy is a way of believing. Joy is a way of seeing. "How happy are you to believe!"

Joy is more than a fleeting emotion. Joy is more than an emotional response to a happy circumstance. Joy is lasting, sustainable, robust because it is a way of believing, a way of seeing -- everything -- in a new light.

Mary believes. Mary believes what the Lord has told her, and because she believes, she sees God ... everywhere. She looks at herself, her world, her people, and everywhere she looks, she sees God at work. She sees all the great things God has done and is doing. She sees the Lord's mercy. She sees the Lord's goodness. She sees the Lord's justice. She sees the God who makes things right. She sees the God who makes the world right. She sees the God who remembers.

She sees the God who remembers ... her. Mary is filled with joy, because God has remembered her.

*My heart praises the Lord;
my soul is glad because of God my Savior,
for he has remembered me, his lowly servant ...*

That's the way the Good News Bible translates the first words of Mary's song. A more literal translation goes something like this:

*My soul magnifies the Lord;
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the humble state of his servant ...*

But who is the Lord's servant? Mary is. She is the Lord's servant. She gave her answer to the Lord's messenger: "I am the Lord's servant, may it happen to me as you have said." But before Mary finishes her song of praise, she will be talking about the Lord's servant ... Israel! And she will be praising God for remembering to show mercy to Abraham and to all his descendants, her people!

This is the astonishing thing about Mary's song. It begins as personal expression of gratitude and joy:

*From now on all people will call me happy,
because of the great things
the Mighty God has done for me ...*

But it quickly becomes clear "me" is not just Mary! The servant in humble state whom God has looked on with favor is her people! Her people who have been so long suffering. Her people who have felt so long neglected. Her people who have left so little hope.

God has remembered ... us! God shows mercy to those who honor him. God thwarts the schemes of tyrants and oppressors. God brings down the high and mighty and lifts up the meek and lowly. God keeps his promises. God has kept his promise and has come to our help. God has remembered us!

Her joy is not just her joy. It is "our" joy, a joy she shares with all her people, a joy she shares with all people who will be brought peace by the One who will be born to save. Mary is filled with joy because she believes, because she believes the Lord's message, because she believes -- though surely the ways and means of it are well beyond her imagining -- because she believes her child will be the king her people have waited for for so long. It is her belief in what God will do, for her and for all her people -- because the two destinies are not separable -- that fills her with joy now.

It is our belief in what God will do, for us and for all God's people -- because our destinies are not separable -- that can fill us with joy now. Joy is more than a fleeting emotion. Joy is more than an individual emotional response to a happy circumstance. Joy is something we share, something lasting and sustainable, and robust because it is a way of seeing everything in a new light.

When we believe what the Lord has told us, we see God ... everywhere. We look at ourselves, at our world, at the people of this world, and we see God at work. We see all the great things God is doing. We see the Lord's mercy. We see the Lord's kindness. We see the Lord's justice. We see the Lord's faithfulness. We are filled with joy because we believe the Lord does keep his promises, because the Lord does remember ... us!

This is what joy is. How happy we are to believe that the Lord's message to us will come true!