

The Lord has filled my heart with joy

1 Samuel 2:1-10, Luke 1:46-55

December 23, 2012

Sometimes I'm happy, and sometimes I'm not.

Some days it just feels good to be alive. I feel eager and energized and empowered. I feel good about what I am doing, about how things are going, and pleased with the results. I feel proud to have something of value to offer other people, and grateful for what they offer me. Some days I don't want to end.

But other days, night and bed can't come soon enough! Some days I feel like I'm spinning my wheels and not getting anything worthwhile accomplished. I feel like I have nothing of value to offer anyone, and I feel only the heavy weight of hurts and frustrations and disappointments and failures. On those days I can't wait for the relief of unconscious sleep, hoping that a new day will be a new day.

Sometimes I'm happy, and sometimes I'm not. It depends.

It depends on circumstances and events beyond my control: weather -- good or bad; news -- good or bad; accidents -- like the day the hospital gurney shattered the rear window of my truck! I was transporting the hospital gurney we used for "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever" from the Cedar Falls Industrial Park back to the church with a stop in southeast Waterloo to drop off Stoney at doggie daycare. It must have been twenty miles altogether and I drove ever so slowly and carefully. Just blocks from the church I had to put on the brakes to stop for a light ... and the gurney slid forward and broke out my rear window! That was a sad day.

It depends on circumstances and events beyond my control and it depends on me: on how well I am doing, on how well I am taking care of myself, on how well I am paying attention to people besides myself, on whether I am making good choices or not.

Happiness comes from good fortune and happiness comes too from good character, but in either case, happiness is a feeling, a personal feeling, a personal feeling of well-being. Happiness is about me and my life, a measure of satisfaction with my life as it is.

Joy is different.

Joy is a virtue. Joy is not a feeling, but a virtue, which means it doesn't merely come over me like a feeling does in response to the ebb and flow of my life. Joy is cultivated, carefully planted and tended and harvested, a fruit of the Spirit. Joy is a virtue produced by the work of God's Spirit on my spirit, and by my willing cooperation in letting joy reshape my perceptions and intentions.

Because joy is a virtue, it is not dependent on circumstances and events. It's not a response to life, but a way of life.

I'm not always happy. And I must confess, I am not always joyful either! Lynne likes to call me Eeyore ... which was also my father's nickname, so I guess I come by it fairly. But I am glad to say that joy never leaves me entirely, and that when the days come when I'm not happy, almost always I still have joy. Because? Because God is!

We heard two songs this morning, two prayers, two exclamations of praise. The first was Hannah's: "The Lord has filled my heart with joy." The second song was Mary's: "My heart praises the Lord, my soul is glad because of God my Savior." Two women. Two songs. Two expressions of joy.

Both Hannah and Mary sang as mothers, as women who had been chosen and blessed by God in the experience of bearing a child.

Hannah sang after her son was born, after, in fact, she had delivered the child to the priest Eli at the house of the Lord in Shiloh. She had been childless, and bitter and miserable and humiliated in her childlessness. One day, she cried out to God in the Lord's house, praying for a son, promising to dedicate that child to the Lord if the Lord would give her a son.

The Lord answered her prayer and gave her a son, and she named him Samuel, and she kept her promise. Samuel went to live and work in the house of the Lord at Shiloh, and Samuel became the man, the good man, who was faithful priest and judge and prophet for the people of Israel. It was Samuel who anointed Israel's first king, Saul, and it was Samuel who anointed David.

Mary sang her song a thousand years after Hannah had sung hers. Mary sang before her son was born, during her pregnancy, during her visit to her pregnant relative, Elizabeth. Mary's pregnancy was not an answer to prayer, but an unexpected surprise, but her song too expressed the joy of bearing a child by God's choice, by God's grace, and when the child was born, she named him, Jesus.

The two songs, sung a thousand years apart, have much in common. Both are expressions of personal joy, but so much more! You heard the songs. Both Hannah and Mary hardly mention themselves at all and their sons not at all. They both sing out of their experience as mothers, but their songs are not mothers' songs.

Their songs are songs of the people of God. They sing about the Lord, about the great things the Lord does, about the Lord's faithfulness generation after generation, about the Lord who keeps promises and blesses his people.

This is what I want you to hear. For both Hannah and Mary it is not "my" joy; it is "our" joy!

Hannah sings: "The Lord protects the lives of his faithful people," and Mary sings: "The Lord has kept the promise he made to our ancestors." Their songs acknowledge the broad implications of the roles their sons, Samuel and Jesus, will play in the life and destiny of God's people, but, more than that, their songs acknowledge the fundamental connection between their own personal experience and the experience of all God's people, between their personal blessing and God's blessing of the entire community.

This is who God is! This is what God does! God shows mercy. God feeds the hungry. God lifts the poor from the dust. God blesses the childless. God remembers his lowly servants. And God brings down the high and mighty. God sends the rich away with empty hands. God breaks the weapons of the strong and foils the plans of the proud.

In other words, God is in the business of turning this world upside-down, and that is what Hannah and Mary sing about. This is what brings them joy.

This is what I want you to hear. This is what I want you to remember. Happiness is personal, but joy is experienced in community. Joy is not about what the Lord is doing for me. Joy is about what the Lord is doing for us!

That's what church is about. We don't just come here one by one to recharge our personal batteries and take something away to get us through the next week. It's not about me. It's about us! We come here to be together, to be in community.

And I'm not just talking about fellowship, about enjoying each other's company and being encouraged by each other's support, as important as that is. We come here to be church together, to be God's people, to be God's witness people, to be people who see our world as it is through God's eyes and the world as it will be through God's vision.

We come here to remind ourselves and to proclaim out loud what God is up to: to remember and celebrate what God has done; to pay attention to and celebrate what God is doing; and to declare and celebrate what God will do.

We come here to sing our praises to the God who is turning the world upside-down! We don't come to ask God to preserve the status quo, to keep things safe and sound as they are, to keep us out of trouble and to let us go on doing what we are doing in relative peace.

No, we come to sing the praises of the One who lifts up the poor and pulls down the rich, who humbles the strong and strengthens the humble, the One who will shake this world to its foundations and will come to the help of those he loves and of those who love him.

Hannah and Mary knew this is who the Lord is. They knew this is what the Lord does and that is why they sang. That is why they sang not about themselves but about their people, about the Lord's goodness and the Lord's blessing for all his people.

This is the secret to joy: getting outside your self!

You may be happy today. You may be unhappy today. And that's OK, either way. It happens. But today, and every day, may the Lord fill your heart with joy! Because it's not just about you. It's about us. It's about what God is doing for us. It's about what God is doing in us. It's about what God is doing through us.

Unto us a child is born! Unto us a son is given!

That's what Grace tried to remind Imogene in the "Best Christmas Pageant Ever." It's not just Mary's baby. This child belongs to all of us. This child is for all of us.

At Christmas, we celebrate the birth of this child ... unto us, the beginning of the end of the world as it is, the beginning of the beginning of the world as it will be. Joy to the world! The Lord is come!