

Sunday, December 11, 2011
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – "Joy to the World"

I would like you to indulge me in a bit of drama.

I am going to ask you to close your eyes for the next few minutes. Go ahead.

And now, I want you to listen to these words from scripture with your whole body.

I want you to feel them as well as hear them.

Take a deep breath in and let a long breath out.

Now, sit very still, eyes closed and listen.

Hear these words being spoken directly to you.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed.

Take another deep breath.

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Another breath,

For the Mighty one has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

One more breath, in and out

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.

OK. You can open your eyes now.

These few short sentences from Isaiah and Luke sum up God's promise to us.

Today we celebrate God's choice of Mary as the mother of Jesus and in a few weeks we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Son of God, but the message today is that you too have been chosen by God.

You too are anointed, sent to bring good news, God looks with favor upon you.

God has done great things for you and covered you with the robe of righteousness.

I particularly love these passages from Isaiah and Luke because they give us hope for transformation.

There is no better example of the transforming power of God's love than the change in Mary from a lowly young woman to one who is called blessed for generations.

Mary's trust in God gives us hope for our own transformation.

What if you started each day reciting those few lines from scripture that we just heard?

What if you went through your day repeating to yourself

"My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my savior."

Do you think it would make a difference?

I do.

I think that when you go through your day with your heart full of love and a sense that you are blessed, your anxiety is reduced, your stress is lowered, you are calmer, you are transformed.

Advent gives us the opportunity to get ready to welcome Jesus into our lives.

It is good that we are given this time, because once we let Jesus in, there is no turning back.

Once our hearts rejoice with love it is hard to return to a life of cynicism and judgment.

Once you count yourself among the blessed, you will see other people in that light as well.

Mary's song and Isaiah's declaration are joyful.

But there is a challenge in their poetry.

Their joy cries out to us to have courage, that we also might be brave enough to be vulnerable to God's transforming grace.

And that takes Trust.

Absolute, unequivocal trust that God is there for you.

Your prayers are heard.

The same spirit of God that came upon Isaiah and overshadowed Mary still moves among us today.

What does it take to completely trust God?

Peter Gomes, former Minister of Memorial Church at Harvard, says that it takes imagination.

He speaks of the Bible as "A book of the imagination".

Gomes said, "Don't think of scripture primarily as rules, as lists of regulations.

Think of the Bible as a book meant to speak, to stoke, to fuel the imagination."

It is only by using our imaginations that we can imagine the angel's visit to Mary or the birth of the child in a manger.

It is in our imaginations that we picture the shepherd's vision of angels in the night sky. Gomes describes imagination as the process when "thought takes wings and rises above mere storing of facts and becomes adventure."

Our lives should be an adventure in which we are pushing ourselves into the unknown, taking chances, trusting God.

At this time of year we get a clear message in trust and imagination from children.

It should not surprise us that children seem more attune to the claims of Christmas.

It isn't because children are ignorant or haven't yet got clear in their young brains what is "real" and what is not.

It's because children are not yet confined within the narrow restraints of officially sanctioned "reality."

For them, the world is a backdrop for their imagination, a stage on which they can be queens or kings, if they have a towel to drape as a royal robe over their shoulders.

Children can feel themselves *clothed with the garments of salvation, covered with the robe of righteousness.*

Our faith is abundant with mystery.

Our imaginations grant us the ability to know a God that we cannot see.

To hear a voice that can't be heard, to feel a presence that cannot be documented.

Imagine, a tomorrow where you are open to the incursions of a living God.

Imagine your life caught up in something bigger than you.

Imagine yourself transformed. This is what God offers.

In the few years I have been in ministry I have seen individuals transform from lonely to loved, from addicted to sober, from suicidal to joyful, from cranky to gracious, from stingy to generous, from sick to healthy, from contentious to kind.

Each of these transformations is an example of God's grace at work in our lives.

One of the most difficult things I hear as a minister is when someone tells me that their problems are too great, their burden too heavy, or their shame too profound to step through the doors of the church.

"I don't want people to see me this way" they say.

"I don't want everyone to know that I am hanging on by a thread."

Well, my friends, let me tell you, we are all hanging on by a thread and it is only God's amazing grace that sees us through.

This advent let us commit ourselves to one another.

Let us spend our Christmas energy building each other up, sharing in each other's joys and pain.

In our scripture story today Mary takes her good news and hurries to share it with Elizabeth.

She does not want to be alone.

She is probably scared of the community's reactions.

She is most likely uncertain about what the future holds for her.

She may have found favor with God, but it is unlikely that she will find favor in her community.

In her time young women were stoned to death for adultery – a crime for which she may be charged.

In this advent season, I want you to think what our response might be to Mary, a young pregnant teen, walking into our church.

Would she find comfort here? Would she be welcomed?

What about John the Baptist, a wild prophet conducting worship out in the wilderness, wrapped in camel hair, surviving on locust.

Would we see him as blessed? Would we welcome him into our midst?

In his book *Letting God Bless You* John Killinger concludes with this challenge:

Permit God to bless you. Don't look around you and think how hard life is. Look around and see how filled with mystery and goodness it is. See how wonderful the world looks when you know God is at work redeeming it and setting up the anti-structures, so that humility and purity and compassion and longing for justice and peace will all be fulfilled and rewarded in the eternal scheme of things.

Give thanks to God for the richness of existence.

Then look around to see who you can share it with.

That will make you even richer.

If you will learn to live this way every day, you will always have a song in your heart and the path before you will be lined with flowers.

Joy will spring up inside you like a fountain, and you will lie down to sleep at night with peace in your soul.”

This Advent season, my friends, let us make the critical choice of permitting God to bless us and to fill us with a new sense of hope and purposeful living.

Let us live in the assurance that the present is not our final destination; that there is indeed much more yet to come.

As you go about your week remember that God has chosen you.

You are anointed to bring good news.

God looks with favor upon you.

God has done great things for you and covered you with the robe of righteousness.

You, my dear friends, are among those blessed by God.

So go out into the world and spread joy.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious and loving God we turn to you this Advent season and seek your grace in our lives.

Help us to live in a way that brings your favor upon us.

Help us to remember that you have called us blessed.

Dear God, we thank you for all the wonderful ways you reveal yourself to us.

We come to you today and pray for healing and comfort for those who are in need.

We pray for Don, Gloria, Alice,

We pray for the Estabrook family and all those who are grieving during this season.

We pray for your presence in the lives of those among us who struggle with addiction, depression, marital strife, loneliness and fear.

We celebrate with gratitude those times in our lives when your grace is abundant.

Dear God we seek to be builders of peace in your kingdom.

We ask that you bless those who lead us that they may have wisdom, courage and faith.

This Advent season we ask for peace in our hearts, in our homes and in your world.

We turn to you now in silence sharing those prayers of our hearts.

Jesus taught them to pray using these words....Our Father