

Search for the Source

Peter JB Carman, December 11, 2011
Binkley Baptist Church, Chapel Hill NC
Luke 1:46b-55; Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

I.

*I will greatly rejoice in God,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for God has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
God has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Sovereign God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.*

On the third Sunday of Advent, we light the pink candle on the wreath. It is a little confusing. For many years, in a church I previously served, we got this wrong almost every year. Some folks liked the pink candle and it would inadvertently get lit by a small child on the first Sunday of Advent or the second. I suspect other folks figured since the pink one was different it maybe should wait for the final Sunday, a little like saving the best food on our plate until after we have eaten our peas. So they would light purple one more time on the third Sunday, saving the best for last.... But no, this is Mary's candle, the rose one, the candle of joy. And this is the Sunday we designate as being all about Joy.

For those of us raised in the stiff-necked and sometimes chilly Protestant traditions of northern Europe, the idea of actually in a visible way rejoicing in church may be a little rough—and surely we don't want to confuse joy with happiness. We hesitate to tell you it is the right time to rejoice. We wouldn't want to FORCE any one to be joyful. But notice we don't mind telling you when to be serious and settle down! Solemnity and formality and awe in the presence of God all seem easier for us to handle, than joyfulness. Let alone getting happy, rockin' out in the presence of God! For those of us raised in other traditions, in Black churches, or coming out of southern Asian village cultures, or growing up Charismatic in this country, it may be easier to get in touch with this joy thing. Let me suggest that all of us can afford to get in touch with the simple joy of being in the presence of the Holy. I mean, it might not hurt TOO much.

What makes you joyful? It surely isn't all about church. Speaking personally, I can usually count on a jam session with some like-spirited acoustic musicians who don't play too much better than I do, or preferably not too much worse for that matter: we can go for hours, sometimes at a frenetic pace. Blisters on the fingers don't bother, voices don't wear out. A spirit takes us over, that is bigger and sweeter and deeper than we are. There is nothing like sharing some good tunes to get joyful. But that's me. Take a moment and think back—what were some places and times when you've been full of joy?

II.

There is something good in the experience of joy in and of itself. The kind of Joy this third Sunday in Advent points us to, however, is not just any joyfulness. The joy of the young pregnant girl Mary, echoing the spirit of Third Isaiah, from whom we read today as well, is rooted in a particular sign from God that she carries deep inside her, a divine and human promise to turn the world upside down. This is a fierce joy, a fiery joy: God will turn everything around, reverse the course of history. The source of Mary's joy is a revolutionary promise to save humanity from the bottom up. It is the promise of a messiah coming to a remote corner of a suffering

nation, to a people in captivity. It is the promise of redemption and liberation, not just long ago and far away, but for all people and all time. It is a deep, deep joy.

In 1926, the poet Langston Hughes dedicated a short poem to W.E.B. DuBois, another prophet of that day, words that pick up on this kind of joy. It is the joy of one who has known suffering and whose ancestors have known suffering, and yet who knows the promise of deliverance.

*I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.*

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

*I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young,
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset.*

*I've known rivers:
Ancient, dusky rivers.*

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.**

Few of us here know personally what it means to build pyramids at another's bidding; nor to live under constant threat. Not everyone knows what it means to run for our lives or to go hungry: although some in this room do know. But every adult human being does know, all of us at some level do know what it means to be trapped in a world where some have and some have not, where some rule and others are ruled, where some occupy and others are occupied. Every one of us at least has some ancestor who suffered beneath the heel, or some friend whose memories we too carry in our bones. Wherever we stand in the uneven terrain of human affairs, we can taste the kind of joy that Mary had, that Isaiah expressed, the kind of joy that runs deep like an ancient river: joy in the promise of One who will "raise up those of low degree" and "scatter the proud in the imagination of their hearts." And yet to get there we may first need to overcome, or at least face, our fear. We must face our numbness. We must acknowledge our despair at the course of human affairs. We must open ourselves to a new birth, as the waters of a revolutionary hope start to rise up within and among humans, a joy-filled river of hope rising to overcome generation after generation of captivity and suffering.

III.

I don't know about you, but lately I have been looking for the source of Joy: not just the fleeting joy of a momentary insight or the flavor of a fine meal, not even the thrumming joy of music pounded out by folk in the grip of a transcendent spirit. No, I mean the kind of joy that cannot be taken away.

This joy comes out of the conviction that God has begun a movement for human liberation. There is One capable of raising up the spirits of those who had no hope. Have you ever worked with people who had lost all hope? I have. And so the news that it is possible to pick it back up, that it is possible to find fresh courage deep within, to make new plans, to get rolling once again in the cause of human emancipation and justice and peace—if we can take that word to heart, that is an extraordinary source for joy.

We live in challenging times in this land. I understand that there are some political leaders in this country and around the world, who have lost hope lately. Others have taken it upon themselves to join an angry movement that is rapidly losing steam, in the hope of gaining power again. These too need to hear Mary's song again, and soak up some of the river that fed Isaiah's dream. Those hardest hit have been the poor and next, those who work with them. There are some people living in urban neighborhoods, and teachers teaching in poor rural and inner city schools, who have given up hope lately, feel ready to quit, even though they have got no place to go. Even middle class folk in communities all over this country are afraid their children may not be able to have what their parents have taken almost for granted. There are folk from all sectors who have lost their way, lost the sense of meaning, don't know what's sacred any more—hard times economically lead quickly to despair.

One of the poorest of the poor took it on herself years ago, to tell all of us about the source of her joy. She insisted on joy when she could have given up. After all if she could read the future she would know she was carrying a child who would but live a few short decades, live on the run, and die a violent death. She was carrying just another mother's son, born to die young. Or was she? She insisted on joy:

*“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
God has looked with favor on God's lowly servant....
[God] has scattered the proud in their conceit,
Casting down the mighty from their thrones
and lifting up the lowly.
[God] has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.
[God] has come to the aid of God's servant Israel,
to remember the promise of mercy,
The promise made to our ancestors....”*

We get some pretty strange ideas about Advent and Christmas in these latter days. We even have some strange pictures of St. Mary meek and mild. But before all the lights and the easy listening, before the glitter and the charming collections of nostalgic paraphernalia, before Mary got dressed in blue and even before her candle glowed pink, before all that, there was an older song, a deeper hope, a stronger river of joy. Before all that was the hope of generation upon generation of the forgotten, the broken, the slave and the captive. Before all that was a young girl speaking with a prophet's power, when all the traditional leaders had grown silent.

In the end, Christianity isn't about ritual and tradition; it is about picking up the sound of that ancient song, proclaiming that ancient message of deliverance. In the end it isn't about whether we get happy in church or sing ancient chants with solemnity. It is about whether we dare to embrace an absurd joy and join a long-ago homeless carpenter rebel peacemaker rabbi and his mother and shout deliverance to the nations—with our actions, with our lives.

May the ancient river wash up over you and me. May the source of Isaiah's call and Mary's hymn run in our bodies, our hearts, our minds. May holy joy cause you to laugh out loud, and take some holy chances with the one life you have been given, to offer it in pursuit of an outrageous dream. Amen.

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**The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, Langston Hughes, 1926, as reprinted in The Norton Anthology of Poetry, revised shorter edition, 1975.