

“Those Who Dream...Sow Joy”  
Luke 1:46-55

At the Christmas in the City parade last week, there were four grinchies and one Santa. When I asked someone about the reason behind this, they said, “It is 2021, of course we will have four Grinchies. Don’t you think that is appropriate?” That is how our world feels these days. The ancient biblical stories about suffering and a national sense of dread used to be things we had to work hard to imagine and connect to because we lived in relative comfort and security. But since the pandemic started, we can more readily and actively relate to the suffering and pain in biblical times. We know all too well about focusing on the Grinch instead of Santa. Every time we get closer to a sense of relief, the pandemic evolves. How do we sow seeds of joy when our hearts are heavy like that? How do we take Mary’s song seriously this season? It is much easier to relate to the feelings of Proverbs 25:20 “Like vinegar on a wound is one who sings songs to a heavy heart. Like a moth in clothing or a worm in wood, sorrow gnaws at the human heart.” Now that sounds more like it! It is like the Peanut cartoon when Snoopy the dog is feeling great. He comes dancing into the first frame saying to himself: “Sometimes I love life so much I can’t express it!” In the second frame he continues to dance: “I feel that I want to take the first person I meet into my arms and dance merrily through the streets.” Then, in the third frame, he meets very grumpy Lucy. Snoopy is silent. In the fourth frame, he is dancing again: “I feel that I want to take the SECOND person I meet into my arms and dance merrily through the streets.”

<https://twitter.com/Snoopy/status/994301734485803009/photo/1>

Yet, in the midst of times of great despair, God calls people to dream God-sized dreams which end up bringing joy to others. In 1957 after the Supreme court desegregated schools, nine African American students faced waves of discrimination as they enrolled in Little Rock Central High School. The governor of Arkansas at the time resisted the federal orders and was ultimately overridden by President Eisenhower. These students became known as the Little Rock Nine. Here is a video about it: <https://youtu.be/ym8rdtq-KBE>. Not only did they help the cause of justice for Black people in our country, but they also inspired a young Paul McCartney of the Beatles to write a song: Blackbird. In 2016, when McCartney played a concert in Little Rock and met two of the surviving Little Rock Nine in person: Elizabeth Eckford and Thelma Wair, he introduced this song as follows:

“Way back in the Sixties, there was a lot of trouble going on over civil rights, particularly in Little Rock. We would notice this on the news back in England, so it’s a really important place for us --we would see what was going on and sympathize with the people going through those troubles, and it made me want to write a song that, if it ever got back to the people going through those troubles, might just help them a little bit –that’s this next one.” Let’s listen to the song: <https://youtu.be/Man4Xw8Xypo>

The song brought joy to millions of people around the world. Yet, a deeper joy is experienced when one knows the circumstances behind it and its deeper message.

It is always good to remember the circumstances of life for biblical characters because they remind us that they too experienced pain, hopelessness, and suffering. Mary's song which is often known as the Magnificat has inspired countless songs, poems, prayers.

These words are familiar to us, but their true meaning and power are better appreciated when we think of the historical, political, and social context for Mary and her people. The vision which Mary proclaimed was far away from the realities of the world. Her joy didn't come because everything was already fulfilled. Her joy came from knowing that the seed of God's love was already planted in her heart and in her own body. Mary knew deep within her that the baby she was carrying was going to change the world. When she visited her cousin Elizabeth who affirmed her faith, there was great joy that welled up in her because she knew deep inside of her heart that God's dream for justice and peace was still alive, and that no hardship could stop that dream from unfolding.

William Barclay, an English theologian, says that the Magnificat is "a bombshell" and has "revolutionary terror." It takes "the standards of the world and turns them upside down." Barclay teaches that in the Magnificat, there are three revolutions: "an economic revolution; a political revolution; and a moral revolution." It is said that the Magnificat "terrified the Russian Czars." In the Magnificat, God totally changes the order of things. God takes that which is on the bottom and puts it on top and the top on the bottom. God revolutionizes the way we think, the way we act, and the way we live. Most of us are impressed with money, power, beauty, and education. But God revolutionizes all of that. The poor are put on the top; the rich are put on the bottom. The Magnificat clearly tells us of God's compassion for the economically poor. There are five important verbs in Mary's words that we need to pay attention to: God regards or respects the poor, exalts the poor, feeds the poor, helps the poor, remembers the poor. God chooses Mary, who is a slave girl, to be the mother of Jesus. God does not choose a princess or a powerful woman. God chooses a teenage girl who was part of an oppressed group of people, the Jews who were occupied by the Romans. Girls in that part of the world were not regarded in high esteem. They were considered to be the property of their fathers and later on of their husbands. The Greek word *doulos* describes Mary in this chapter in Luke as a slave. So, God exalted a slave girl to fulfill God's purposes of love. Yet, something was truly unique about Mary. The whole Christ event took place because Mary was in touch with something other than her calculating mind. Her imagination and her ability to see visions were strong and alive in her. Her imagination was powerful enough to allow her to catch the dream of God for the world. Even though no human mind would have imagined Christ coming into the world through the faith of a lowly young woman, Mary's imagination was big enough to see beyond our human limitations.

Mary's joy was deeply rooted in God's dream. Believing that God's dream for freedom and peace to be possible despite the despair and pain of the time was a radical act of sowing seeds of joy.

Advent is a time for dreaming big dreams, and so we ask ourselves: What if we lived believing Mary's Magnificat that God is turning the world into goodness? What if we studied the Bible and the work of the Spirit in our lives to be led to always believe in this

positive imagination of our world? Would we be able to accept that God uses anyone and turns our standards upside down? Are we willing to receive from whomever God chooses as a vehicle for revelation? What if it is someone we don't hold in high esteem? What if it is someone who is otherwise marginalized by society and the circles of power? What if it is you? Are you ready to imagine with God such a world? Are you ready for such deep joy?

I would like to end with a part of the story of someone who believed in God's dreams for the world and who sowed amazing seeds of joy. Toward the end of her life, Mary McLeod Bethune wrote her "Last Will and Testament." After many years of working as a teacher and public servant, she founded a school for girls that became a celebrated Historically Black College and was a well-known public speaker and advisor to President Roosevelt. She did not have a lot of material wealth to bequeath to others, but she had virtues that she believed would be great treasures and seeds of hope, joy, and peace to others. She wrote, "Without faith, nothing is possible. With it, nothing is impossible. Faith in God is the greatest power, but great, too is faith in oneself." Here is a video about her life: [https://youtu.be/wMiae\\_UHBmM](https://youtu.be/wMiae_UHBmM).

May our souls always magnify the Lord, like Mary did! Amen.