

Joy

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Montavilla United Methodist Church

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Luke 1:39-45

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Hail Mary full of Grace

the Lord is with thee!

Blessed art thou among women

and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus.

Holy Mary, mother of God,

(and I always add) Apostle and Prophet, (because Mary was an Apostle and a Prophet)

pray for us sinners

now and at the hour of our death.

I learned the Hail Mary, when I was 8 years old in remedial Catholic Catechism, because my father married a Catholic, so I was converted.

Yes, your Pastor was baptized Roman Catholic!

How many of you were raised to believe that Catholics worship Mary and other saints? That Catholics practice idolatry, and are too involved in politics? How many of you were raised to believe that Roman Catholics are generally suspect? How many of you were raised that way?

Fabulous! Then I'm sure you'll be happy to join me in the Protestant war on Christmas! You see, in 1647 after ousting the Catholic King Charles I, the Puritan government of England canceled Christmas. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/15/opinion/the-puritan-war-on-christmas.html>

That's right. The Protestants canceled the heathen Popery of Christmas because it was too joyful!

With thanks to Rachel N. Schnepfer for her article, "Yuletide's Outlaws" from the Dec. 14, 2012 edition of the New York Times, I bring you the true story of the war on joy at Christmas time.

You see, a traditional Catholic Christmas involved a bunch of wild carousing and merriment including:

- Singing
- Feasting
- Drinking
- Games
- Dressing up in costumes - often in the clothes of the opposite gender - and performing Christmas plays in homes or in the street
- Caroling and wassailing which sometimes resulted in rich people inviting poor people inside for a feast! Thus encouraging mixing of the social classes!

Puritans were horrified, I say, horrified! Those Catholics observed Christmas with more revelry than piety!

And most importantly for the Protestant, *sola scriptura* crowd, there is no Scriptural command for the celebration of Jesus' birth!

Christmas is nothing more than a thin Christian veneer slapped on the pagan Saturnalia celebration.

The celebration of the Christ Mass contains entirely too much joy!

So, in 1647, the Puritan's canceled Christmas.

Merriment was forbidden.

Shops were ordered to stay open.

Churches were shut down and ministers were arrested for preaching on Christmas Day!

Naturally, the Puritans who came to America, did not celebrate Christmas either!

Instead, they worked!

One year, one colony's governor, William Bradford, yelled at visitors to the colony who, unaware that Christmas was canceled, were taking the day off. He found them "in the streete at play, openly; some pitching the barr, and some at stoole-ball, and shuch like

sports.” Horrors! After that incident, no one tried to take Christmas day off of work in the colony again.

“The Puritans in the Massachusetts Bay Colony went one step further and actually outlawed the celebration of Christmas. From 1659 to 1681, anyone caught celebrating Christmas in the colony would be fined five shillings.

Well into the 18th century, those attempting to wassail (wassailing is the tradition of offering to sing carols, perform small Christmas plays, and provide other merriment for the rich in exchange for being invited in for treats), those attempting to Wassail in New England often found themselves arrested and fined. Indeed, the Puritan War on Christmas lasted up to 1870 - 5 years after the end of the civil war -, when Christmas became a legally recognized federal holiday. Until then, men and women were expected to go to work, stores were expected to remain open, and many churches did not even hold religious services.”

The original Methodists, as good Protestants, were not real big on Christmas either. There are no Christmas sermons among the collected Sermons of John Wesley, and... “*Some speculate the Methodist preachers may have chosen to begin the founding conference of The Methodist Episcopal Church on Christmas Eve 1784 because they were all available (since none of them were leading Christmas Eve services). Methodists would later refer to that gathering as the [Christmas Conference](https://www.umc.org/en/content/five-things-you-may-not-know-about-christmas).* <https://www.umc.org/en/content/five-things-you-may-not-know-about-christmas>

Charles Wesley, that Popish rogue!, however, wrote the first version of the hymn we now know as “Hark the Herald Angels Sing,” and published a whole booklet of Christmas Carols called, *Hymns for the Nativity of our Lord*, in 1745.

So - what say you Methodists?

Shall we cancel all the Christmas frivolity, like good protestants, or shall we Celebrate Christmas like Catholics?

Before I did this research, I didn't know that Scrooge was such a realistic character! Bah Humbug, indeed!

What is it about joy that bothers some religious people so much?

I think part of what is so bothersome about joy is that joy is not productive.

- Caroling, partying, feasting, plays and costumes and giving to the poor, who did not earn it, are the direct opposite of productivity!
- Laughter, hugs, games, and festive snacks in the breakroom slow down the pace of work.
- Days off for time with friends and family, time spent together neither buying, nor making, nor selling slows down the economy!

In short, real Christmas joy - the joy taking a minute to celebrate God's love for us, isn't good for business. And the Protestant work ethic loves business!

Another thing that bothers our religious men about the Christmas story is that it is disturbingly centered on women.

I say disturbingly, because for most of human history men have thought of themselves as in charge and tend to get a little snippy when women prove them wrong.

If you think about it, Jesus' story begins and ends with women being the first to believe and rejoice.

In the end, it was Mary, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the Mother of James and the other women with them (Lk 24:10) who witnessed the resurrection and believed with joy, while the men were busy mansplaining the women's wild story away as idle gossip.

Likewise in the beginning of the Jesus story, Zecharia, John the Baptist's father, and Joseph, Jesus' adoptive father, don't believe it when they are told about John and Jesus' impending births. But Elizabeth and Mary do.

Elizabeth just thanks God that her infertility is over and when Gabriel, says, "Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with thee!"

Mary says, OK, but how? And when Gabriel explains that Mary will be giving birth to the son of God, Mary is all in.

In today's scripture we find cousins Elizabeth and Mary rejoicing in their unexpected pregnancies - even though their situations were complicated.

Baby John leaps with joy in Elizabeth's womb and Elizabeth cries out,

“Blessed art thou among women
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus!”

Which brings us back to the Catholic prayer:

*“Hail Mary full of Grace
the Lord is with thee!*

*Blessed art thou among women
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus.”*

...the first two lines of the prayer are the joyful proclamations of the Christmas story embraced by the faith of women.

Joy, as our video talked about, is not determined by our successes, our safety, or our circumstances. Joy, like hope, like faith, is a choice.

Life is hard.

If you yourself are not currently struggling with something, you know someone, dear to you, who is.

And life in the first century was even harder for women.

Elizabeth’s life was hard, as an older infertile woman in a patriarchal culture. Not only was a woman’s worth measured by her ability to have children. Her economic future was dependent on her children. Because Zecharia had no son, Elizabeth’s home would go to Zecharia’s nearest male relative when he died, leaving Elizabeth dependent on distant relatives, or she could move to Jerusalem and live on the widow’s dole from the Temple. So for Elizabeth, this pregnancy was an absolute joy! Baby John meant not just a long desired child, but security in her old age. Except John doesn’t exactly turn out to be the kind of son who gets a good job and takes care of his mother.

For Mary, joy was definitely a choice.

Mary was:

Unmarried, with a fiance who didn’t believe her at first.

Gave birth in a barn.

Then fled to Egypt as political refugees...

And yet, Mary rejoiced!

All along the way, Mary kept looking at this difficult miracle of a son, and rejoicing that God let her be a part of the story.

And that kind of joy - the joy of knowing that God is up to something that will be good news for women and orphans and the poor- this kind of Joy creates all kinds of disorder!

You see the dour Protestants were right!

Christmas Joy is dangerous!

Christmas Joy elevates the voices of women, and poor shepherds, and elderly widows like Anna.

Christmas Joy proclaims the possibility of peace to those who are tired of dying in rich men's wars.

Christmas Joy takes a break from work to have a party.

Christmas Joy proclaims the hope that the arc of history can be bent towards justice.

Christmas joy sings carols not because our lives are perfect, or because we expect God to solve all of our problems but because God is with us.

God is with us in the midst of the messiness of life.

So for our prayer practice today, I want to invite you to share in the Catholic practice of lighting candles to hold our prayers. Sometimes we don't know what to ask for, or we don't have the words to speak our prayers.

So I light my Mary candle and ask Mary to say a prayer for me.
You don't need to say a Hail Mary.

You can say any prayer you want to, or just light the candle when you have no words, because God knows. God is with us and God knows.