A Song of Joy

Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-11; Luke 1:46b-55
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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On Tuesday, March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared the outbreak of Covid-19 a “pandemic.”

All of a sudden, this ugly, scary word previously associated mainly with dystopic Hollywood movies or “bad things that happen on the other side of the world,” became a part of our everyday vocabulary.

Pandemic. This week, I spent some time looking at this ugly word that has so dominated our lives over the last nine months.

The word comes to us in English from the Greek *pan* ("all") and *demos* ("people" or “crowd”). It has the same root as “democracy” (*dēmos* 'people' and *kratos* 'rule').

So, “pandemic” refers to something that affects “all” the “people.” And this virus has.

I read an article this week where Dr. Deena Hinshaw was addressing reports of communities or ethnic groups being stigmatized for their role in the spread of the virus. At one point, she had this to say:

> We are all equally at risk… COVID-19 does not care about a person's occupation, race, or religion… postal codes or county lines.[1]

Now, as a means of urging Albertans toward greater understanding, kindness, and compassion toward their neighbour, Hinshaw’s remarks are understandable enough. As a tool to get us to modify our behaviour, I get it.

But of course, we are not all equally at risk.

[1] https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/deena-hinshaw-alberta-covid-19-coronavirus-1.5835928

There is much that we still do not know about his virus and its long-term effects, but there are some things that seem quite clear so far.

Older people are more at risk than younger people. People with underlying conditions are more at risk than those who are healthier.

And beyond basic biology and epidemiology, we know that we are not all equally at risk in other ways, as well.

Those who have the luxury of working from home do not bear the same burden of risk as those who have often low-paying jobs in retail or service industries, or those who work in factories.

Those who have their own vehicles do not bear the same burden of risk as those who must use public transportation to get to where they need to go.

Those who can afford spacious homes with back yards in sparsely populated towns do not bear the same burden of risk as those living in crowded apartments in densely populated cities.

And if we want to drill even a little deeper down, we know that each of the above economic categories can also be mapped on to racial categories.

One study published in July by researchers at the NYU Grossman School of Medicine found that "in poorer US counties, those with substantial non-white populations had eight times the number of Covid infections than those with substantially white populations, and nine times the number of deaths."[2]

It wouldn't look exactly the same in Canada or Alberta. But we have only to look at stories like the outbreaks in meat-packing plants in High River and Brooks, where many employees are non-white to see similar trends. Recent immigrants to Canada tend to be associated with many of the living conditions and employment realities that place them at higher risk.

Yes, there are exceptions to each of the above, but they remain just that: exceptions.

[2] https://www.wired.com/story/who-will-we-be-when-the-pandemic-is-over/?utm_source=pocket-newtab

In very general terms, those who are the most at-risk for serious outcomes from COVID-19 tend to be non-white and poor. They tend to be those already suffering from health challenges. They tend to be the physically frail and vulnerable.

COVID-19 is a *pan-demic* in the sense that the virus itself does not discriminate—it can affect anyone. But it does not affect all people equally.

This pandemic has tended to disproportionately affect precisely those people who are already used to being on the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder or those who are marginalized and undervalued for other reasons, whether because of age, disability, poor health, or the racial inequalities that exist in our society.

We are *not* all equally at risk when it comes to the pandemic in the same way that we are not all equally at risk when it comes to life more generally.

Because the world is not a just or a fair place.

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It has ever been thus, as our Scriptures today remind us. But it will not always be.

We've heard two passages this morning, both with words of hope for the poor, the downtrodden, the lowly, the broken-hearted, those who mourn, the oppressed.

The ones used to being on the wrong end of the score and bearing more than their share of the risk.

Isaiah proclaims liberty to captives, release to the prisoners. He speaks of the year of God's favour, of mourning being turned into gladness and praise.

Release. Recovery. Freedom. Favor. Good news for those not used to much good news.

These words from Isaiah are the ones Jesus himself latches on to years later when he comes to his hometown Nazareth, marches off to church, and appoints himself the morning's Scripture reader. He takes the scroll of Isaiah and reads the very words you heard in church this morning:

> "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
> because he has anointed me

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he sat down and said, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Right now, he astonishingly says. Present tense.

Our second text is Mary's *Magnificat* from Luke 1 which celebrates the fulfillment of Isaiah's hope.

Mary's song is a song of joy in response to the utterly unique, utterly unrepeatable, utterly astonishing announcement that a peasant teenager in a backwater town in a tiny outpost of the first century Roman Empire was going to give birth to the long-awaited culmination of Israel's hope.

Mary's song is more than a spontaneous response to the news that she was going to have a very famous baby. It is that, but it is more than that as well.

Mary's song is quite literally saturated in the hope of Israel.

Virtually every line refers to other parts of the Hebrew Bible, summarizing and encapsulating the longing and expectation of her people—the people of the promise.

She sings of the upside-down nature of God's work in the world

- The scattering of the proud;
- The dethroning of the powerful and arrogant;
- The raising up of the lowly;
- The filling of the hungry with "good things.

She sings for joy of the unshakeable conviction that when Israel's God comes, it is good news for those used to an awful lot of bad news.

Joy is the natural and exuberant response to the faithfulness of God in keeping his promise to his people.

And Mary's song is present tense! The Lord *has done* these things, she says.

Which is strange, because Jesus hasn't even done anything yet. He hasn't preached or baptized or performed any miracles. He hasn't overthrown any rulers. There are still plenty of poor people who are exploited by the rich, plenty of vulnerable people who suffer disproportionately.

The oppressive Roman Empire marches on. Jesus hasn't fixed anything! He certainly hasn't died or risen from the dead or ascended into heaven! He hasn't even been born!!

Yet, despite all that Mary doesn't know (as we sing in the famous song), Mary does know that her child will change things.

She knows—somehow—that the baby in her womb marks the turning point of God's story. She knows that his kingdom, strange though it is, and gradual though its appearance might be, will have no end.

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We often like to speak, in Christian circles, about the God who descends, who comes down, who is somehow nearest to those on the bottom.

I suspect that some of us implicitly think that all this talk about God's joining humanity "at the bottom" is kind of like the charitable side of God.

God is, after all, very, very big and very, very powerful and is the sovereign ruler over all that is.

This coming to be with, this coming *as one of* the lowly ones is, we perhaps imagine, a kind of brief interlude in the life and nature of God. As if God periodically pauses from his ordinary, more God-like activities to spare a sentiment for the downtrodden.

But our texts on the Third Sunday of Advent declare to us that this is no interlude, no temporary mode of operating. It is the very nature of who God is, how God loves, and what God wants.

And whatever else this means, at the very least it says that those whose primary experience in life is of not fitting, not belonging, failing to measure up, constantly struggling and straining,

and finding themselves in harm's way—these are the ones who are, in some sense, closest to the very heart of God.

The losers and the misfits, the awkward and the rejected, the poor and the needy, the lonely, the ugly and the embarrassing, the incompetent and inconvenient.

The ones whose primary experience in life is of being on the wrong end of the score, of being on the outside looking in, of not having enough, of being ignored and mistreated, of not being seen.

The lonely, the "at-risk," the isolated, the hopeless, the sick, the dying.

Those who bear the burdens of life, whether during "normal" times or abnormal times (like a pandemic), whether because of physical or socioeconomic vulnerability.

These ones, the gospel of Christ impossibly says, will be first. These ones, I think, are the ones for whom passages like Isaiah 61 and Mary's song from Luke *most* sound like good news.

They will no longer be defined by the cruel standards of a world that doesn't know what or how to value. They will no longer judged by what they are not or what they cannot do, or even how they have failed, but by who they are, who they were created to be.

When God comes, they will be seen truly, maybe for the first time, for what and for who they are. And, perhaps most importantly, for *whose* they are.

They will know that God is different—that God sees differently, that God values differently, that God loves differently than everything their experience has taught them about how human lives are measured.

This is the hope that inspired Isaiah's prophetic proclamation and Mary's song of joy.

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What does this mean for us today? Well, it means what it has always meant for God's people throughout history.

First, we are to be people whose hope is shaped by the story of God who acted in Jesus Christ.

We must not settle for a kind “pie-in-the-sky-one-day-when-I-die kind of hope. As Christians, we are waiting for the God of history to come and make things right; to raise up those bowed low by the injustices of our world, those who suffer, those who bear burdens that some never face.

We must not give up on this hope. Even when it seems a long time in coming. We must be people who cultivate the spiritual discipline of waiting and watching.

Second, we must be people whose behaviour in the present is shaped by our vision of God’s future.

We must hear Isaiah’s call to live lives of justice, truth, and proper worship. We must align ourselves with the new reality of Mary’s song, the great reversal where poor, the lowly, the weak, the hungry are given new status and the mighty are brought down.

God’s priorities must become our priorities; and God clearly prioritizes a world in which the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, the oppressed, the misunderstood are raised up.

I would add a one more. We are to be people with a song of joy in our hearts, even in difficult times.

The great reversal, the great levelling that is the subject of both our passages this morning and the Christian hope more generally, comes to us first and foremost not as an agenda for world improvement that we are to accomplish, but as the gift of God.

Isaiah speaks of good news, of favour, of “the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.” He speaks of exultation, praise, and blessing. Mary’s spirit “rejoices” in God her Saviour.

In both cases, joy comes out of the knowledge of what God has done and what God will do. The great reversal that our world groans for can only come as a gift of God.

I have a friend who is presently in Alcoholics Anonymous. The first two steps demand that participants acknowledge that:

1. We are powerless over that which enslaves us
2. Only a power outside ourselves can bring liberation

This is true for all of us and for our world more broadly. We can make progress. We can choose better or worse. We can participate and align ourselves with God's intentions to varying degrees at different times over our lives.

But ultimately, it is only God who can save, who can liberate, who can reorient and deliver us and our world.

For anyone who has ever come to the end of themselves, who has struggled with an addiction, who doesn't know how to stop sabotaging relationships, who has run out of options in trying to help someone we love, who has reached the end of their proverbial rope, this is indeed cause for joy.

At the end of it all, we *all* know that when it comes to our deepest need, help has to come from the outside. And it has.

May God help us to have a song of joy, if not on our lips, the in in our hearts during these last days of Advent.

The Mighty One has done great things. The Mighty One is doing great things, even now in the dark cold of Advent, in the midst of a pandemic. And the Mighty One will do great things.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.