

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Third Sunday of Advent – December 11, 2016 – JOY
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Luke 1:46b-55 * Magnificat

For Reflection

“Without pain, how could we know joy?’ This is an old argument in the field of thinking about suffering and its stupidity and lack of sophistication could be plumbed for centuries but suffice it to say that the existence of broccoli does not, in any way, affect the taste of chocolate.”

— John Green, The Fault in Our Stars

“Sorrow prepares you for joy. It violently sweeps everything out of your house, so that new joy can find space to enter. It shakes the yellow leaves from the bough of your heart, so that fresh, green leaves can grow in their place. It pulls up the rotten roots, so that new roots hidden beneath have room to grow. Whatever sorrow shakes from your heart, far better things will take their place.”

— Jalaluddin Rumi, (1207-1273) 13th-century Persian poet, jurist, Islamic scholar, theologian, and Sufi mystic

"Like a room without a roof..."

In the early 1950's Anne Smith intended to get her Masters' Degree in Business Administration. She wanted to go to Harvard but they didn't allow women into the MBA program. Ditto for the other Ivy League Colleges – and even the University of Pennsylvania. However, USC decided to take a risk and invite women who had been turned down at these other colleges to join their MBA program.

On the first day of classes three of her professors gave a similar speech – explaining why the women would not be expected to meet the same high demands as the men in their class. It had something to do with the smaller female cranial capacity – not enough room for the same amount of brain matter as men. The women would also be sitting in the hallway outside the class room – listening to the lectures from the doorway – so as not to be a distraction to their male classmates. Speaking of small cranial capacity...

Her male classmates hooted and thought this was the funniest thing. They provided uninvited comments and generally made life uncomfortable for Anne and the other women in the program who remained diligent in their studies. During the second week of classes Anne arrived to find her male classmates sitting in the hallway. She suggested they go inside and refrain from harassing her. However, the young men admitted that enough was enough – that they would be sitting in the hallway with her until she was admitted into the classroom. That was the end of gender segregation in the USC MBA program.

Anne observed that there was one thing in common among those three professors – they had absolutely no sense of humor. And this got me thinking that a sense of humor may be a prerequisite for – or a component of – an open mind and a broader perspective.

Anne Smith later worked for IBM and was the only woman at the administrative level. All the restrooms on her floor were for men only and she found she was not welcome in the women's room used by the secretarial pool. Her relative power in the company made the women feel like they couldn't smoke or chat freely in their private hang-out. So, management made a sign for Anne to hang on the men's room door. While that sign was on the door, none of the men could enter.

At her first staff meeting where she was expected to make a presentation, a man came in and said, "So you're the female. Who are you?" She introduced herself.

He responded, "I don't sit at the same conference table with women. I can have you removed from this room. Now that's power."

She asked, "What floor do you work on, this one?" He nodded.

She reached into her purse, pulled out her bathroom sign and smacked it down on the table – saying, "Now that's power."

All the other men in the room laughed and lightly punched Anne in the arm. The power male was no longer a problem for Anne.

- Stories told at the kitchen table at my Dad's house 12-7-2016

As Anne suggested, a sense of humor can be a tool for social change. It can also help us recognize G-d's sense of humor as the tables are turned on those in power.

So, I'm going to tell you for a fact – Mary (Miryam in Hebrew), Mother of Jesus (Jeshua in Hebrew) – that girl had a sense of humor. She's a teenager, engaged but not married – and G-d invites and/or causes her to become the unwed mother of a human child who will grow up to be G-d's son and messenger – none of which will become apparent until after he's raised, grown, does his thing and gets killed for it. There is no way you agree to do something like that – or survive the experience – unless you have a huge sense of humor – and understand that G-d does too.

Our biblical text this morning has been labeled The Magnificat – Latin for "Magnify" – as in "My soul magnifies the Lord." This speech or song written by the writer of the Gospel of Luke – captures Mary's sense of humor and joy.

51 [G-d] has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

Haha!!!! So there!!! That's POWER!

One of the core tenets of Jesus' ministry is to turn the tables, turn the power structure upside down, defy expectations, and generally mess with people's heads and hearts. The expected losers are the winners, the marginalized, sick, disabled, and poor are G-d's beloved – and women – believe it or not – WOMEN are allowed to come out of the kitchens and hallways and sit at the feet of the professor rabbi and found to be the best students with the deepest understanding of what is being taught. They are even the first witnesses to the punchline of his life story – doing women's work at the tomb. Gotta laugh between crying jags.

So, TWO THOUSAND years later – in this age of enlightenment – we have this woman who came out of the kitchen, put up with incredible harassment in law school and government chambers, and spent her life in service to and making life a little easier for families, children, women in particular – and ran for president. And this woman won as many votes as Obama in 2012 — just not in the states where she needed them most.

<http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-election-final-20161209-story.html>

She challenged power and power is fighting back with a vengeance – lying and manipulating and cozying up to dictators to keep her in the hallway. But she's got a few good men punching her gently on the shoulder and a few million people of all genders and generations fighting back against the evil empire. Now THAT's POWER!

At the risk of sounding like I'm engaging in a non-sequitur – I've been wondering for at least a year about the meaning of a song called HAPPY by PHARRELL WILLIAMS. And since today, the Third Sunday of Advent, is traditionally about JOY – I looked up the lyrics. And that didn't help.

[Verse 1:]

It might seem crazy what I'm about to say
Sunshine she's here, you can take a break
I'm a hot air balloon that could go to space
With the air, like I don't care, baby, by the way

[Chorus:]

Because I'm happy
Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof
Because I'm happy
Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth
Because I'm happy
Clap along if you know what happiness is to you
Because I'm happy
Clap along if you feel like that's what you wanna do

The line that always stops me is: “Clap along if you feel **like a room without a roof...**”
What the heck does that mean? Any ideas?

- Happy to not be closed in?
- Happy to be able to see the stars?
- Happy to have survived a tornado?
- Xx?
- Xx?

But after writing this reflection I realized that – at least for me – feeling like a room without a roof is the joy of having broken through the glass ceiling. It is having no barriers to success in our work just because of gender. It is walking to our cars at night and not having to worry about physical danger. It is being invited out of the hallways and into the classrooms of academia. It is having gender free bathrooms, equal pay for equal work, equal opportunity, and a place at the table. It is winning an election and actually being able to take office.

It is knowing that G-d has:

...scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts...brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly...filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

Now THAT is JOY.

Scripture Reading for Sunday December 11, 2016 – Advent 3 – Year A

Luke 1:46b-55 * Magnificat

46b "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. **51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.** 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

JOY

True inner joy is self – created.
It does not depend on outer circumstances.
A river is flowing in and through you carrying the message of joy.
This divine joy is the sole purpose of life.

- Sri Chinmoy

Let us live in joy, not hating those who hate us.
Among those who hate us, we live free of hate.
Let us live in joy,
free from disease among those who are diseased.
Among those who are diseased, let us live free of disease.
Let us live in joy, free from greed among the greedy.
Among those who are greedy, we live free of greed.
Let us live in joy, though we possess nothing.
Let us live feeding on joy, like the bright gods.

- Buddha

Psalm 30

1 I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up,
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.
2 O Lord my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me...

4 Sing praises to the Lord, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.
5 For his anger is but for a moment;
his favor is for a lifetime.
Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning...

11 You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,
12 so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

You know, the ancient Egyptians had a beautiful belief about death. When their souls got to the entrance to heaven, the guards asked two questions. Their answers determined whether they were able to enter or not. 'Have you found joy in your life?' 'Has your life brought joy to others?'

- Morgan Freeman

PHARRELL WILLIAMS

"Happy"

[Verse 1:]

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Sunshine she's here, you can take a break
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Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth
Because I'm happy
Clap along if you know what happiness is to you
Because I'm happy
Clap along if you feel like that's what you wanna do

[Verse 2:]

Here come bad news talking this and that, yeah,
Well, give me all you got, and don't hold it back, yeah,
Well, I should probably warn you I'll be just fine, yeah,
No offense to you, don't waste your time
Here's why