

Mary – a woman of joy

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church December 13th, 2020 Luke 1)

This week is the third of Advent. This week we think about joy.

In our readings today we find a young woman in an out of the way town. She is engaged to Joseph, a local tradie. Her life ahead of her, wedding plans being made.

Visited by an angel, told she is favoured by God – scared out of her wits probably, wondering what this is all about. Told not to be afraid – really! And again, she is told she is favoured by God.

Well that all seemed very nice, but what was this really all about. Well soon she finds out the reason for the visit, there will be a child, a child who is the long-awaited Messiah and will be called Jesus. So how does Mary respond? Really, that is impossible. Then more news, her cousin who is older and barren is also with child. What on earth is going on?

The angel then tells her not to be afraid and that nothing is impossible with God. I wonder how long she sat there taking it all in before she responded. Clearly, she is a religious woman who would have known about the coming Messiah who would liberate the people. How long did it take for her to respond? Finally, she says, ‘so be it’. Then the angel leaves. Does he go back to heaven rejoicing, saying she said yes, she said yes! An invitation from God, a response to such an invitation – all without any fanfare.

And then it happens – she does get pregnant! What a dilemma! She now has to go and explain to her family, and to explain it all to Joseph.

What a predicament! What will happen next? What will Joseph do and say? Will he dump her or worse? Will she have to deal with this alone? Will she and her family be shamed? How will she explain it all, will anyone believe her? What will the neighbours do and say?

We know the rest of the story – a quick visit to the hills to her cousin Elizabeth. Joseph doesn't abandon her. The government adds to her trauma by calling for a census which means she must travel with Joseph to Bethlehem about 100 miles away all in her last trimester. Heavily pregnant there is no accommodation, but a family take pity on them and let them stay in the stable out the back. Out back with the animals she gives birth to this promised child and the first visitors – some rough and ready local shepherds! Within months they have to flee and become a refugee family in Egypt. Wonder if she pondered all those possibilities during the visit from the angel?

Extraordinary circumstances for this young girl!

Her first response is one of acceptance. Albeit, after a bit of a discussion, with the messenger of God, about this seemingly impossible situation. A woman who is able to say yes to whatever God wants of her. After time pondering she is able to give her free, humble and wholehearted consent to God.

Her second response is to flee. She quickly goes to visit Elizabeth. Does she go to help her older cousin? Does she go there because she thinks Elizabeth might understand? Does she go there to check, if, what the angel said is true? Does she go there to get

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advice from an older woman? Does she go there for rest or renewal or time to think about what is happening? I have always wondered – where is her own mother. I wonder about that journey, did she take it alone? How ill did she feel, given she was in her first trimester? What did the two women talk about – so many differences and yet so many similarities. Both unexpected pregnancies. Both victims of shame – Elizabeth because she was barren, Mary because she is unmarried and her betrothed is not the father. Both have partners who are finding it all a bit difficult – Zechariah finding it all too difficult to believe is struck dumb, Joseph weighing up his options and thinking about leaving Mary.

Her third response is joy. Upon arrival at Elizabeth's, she is greeted with joy, Elizabeth can't believe that Mary who will bear God's Son has come to visit her. Even her baby knows something is up and leaps for joy. Was the house that day filled with laughter?

And then Mary utters her song of praise, her song of joy, reminiscent of Hannah.

Let's look a little closer at her song of joy and what it tells us about God.

She celebrates a God who shows his favour to the 'little' people. A God who uses them to bring about his plan for the world. A God who does not require people to be perfect before he connects with him. It reminds us of the prophet Isaiah and how he says there will be joy in unexpected places and people – the desert blooms, the frightened are strengthened, the blind see, the lame leap and the deaf hear.

Mary celebrates the liberation God is bringing, she celebrates a world turned upside down, about the rich being sent away empty, the hungry fed with good things. This is joy!

Mary's song of joy gives hope to the poor, to the neglected, to people on the margins.

Mary is a woman of joy.

She shows us that we can overcome our fear and let joy in.

She shows us that we can experience joy even in the midst of confusion, upheaval, suffering and chaos.

She shows that even before he is born Jesus is bringing joy.

For us down through the centuries, the joy that we celebrate at this time of the year, is that God in Jesus has stepped into human history and turned the world on its head. The message of the Gospel of Christ fills us with hope and gratitude.

Joy is not elusive, it is not beyond our reach, it can transform us.

So, go out into this week with joy. Joy in the knowledge that God has loved us all so much that he entered our history, shared our lot. Joy in the knowledge that God can use the little, the insignificant, the unexpected and change the world.

Joy to the world, the Lord has come! Amen.