

## Mary Did You Know the Joy?

*(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on Dec 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023 - (Luke 1:46-55))*

I had to admit that initially I didn't feel much joy. My name is Maryam and I was young, unmarried but betrothed to a lovely man called Joseph who stood my me. I had discovered to my surprise that I was pregnant, which was not usually a problem but at the time I was unmarried.

The first thing that happened was that I was visited by an angel who not only scared the living daylights out of me but gave me a message that initially I struggled to understand.

I was told that I was going to have a child, well that bit was okay, but it was going to be really soon. Now that didn't fill me with joy. How could that happen? How was I going to tell Joseph? What would he say? How was I going to tell the rest of my family? Was I about to bring nothing but shame on them too?

I was and still am a fairly religious person, a good girl really. I attended synagogue each week, truly believed in God who had promised to be with his people and to hear their cries.

Still not feeling much joy I had to get away, get away from the scandal, the snide comments, the looks. So, I took off to see my cousin Elizabeth, she lived up in the hills and it took me a few days to get there. Not much joy on that journey – feeling queasy for most of the trip, wondering what she and her husband, who was a priest, would say, but, I had to get away from peering eyes and also give Joseph some space, some space to think about what he wanted to do.

Elizabeth and Zechariah were great. I ended up staying for about three months. Turns out Zechariah had had a strange experience too, he too had been visited by an angel, a messenger who told him about the child he and Elizabeth were expecting. They too knew a bit about scandal, you see they were a little too old to be having a baby. Here we were, both with unexpected pregnancies, both of us were surrounded by scandal and shame, both of us knew that our children had a special task in the plan of God.

Elizabeth was great. She understood my situation and was able to give me wise advice, she shielded me from the stares of others, Upon my arrival, she warmly welcomed me and then she had some interesting things to say, filled me with joy. Elizabeth couldn't believe that I, the one who will bear God's Son had come to visit her. Even her baby knew something was up and leapt for joy.

After a time of reflection, I began to feel some joy, and one day I just had to sing, I sang a song a bit like my ancestor Hannah. I had come to the conclusion, that God will show his favour to the 'little' people and use them (even me) to bring about his plan for the world. God was bringing the liberation he promised, the world would indeed be turned upside down by these two babies, the hungry fed, the poor lifted up. God is a source of hope for the poor, neglected and those on the margins. This is joy!

As time went on, I began to understand that real joy doesn't mean ignoring suffering, it is not forced, it is deeper than just happy times, it lifts us up when we are down or confused, it doesn't carry us away rather it deepens our love for God and the world. Real joy brings peace, it's a bit elusive but is also contagious.

In time I went back to Joseph to see what he had decided to do. He was amazing, stood by me.

But then we found out we had to travel to Bethlehem, miles away all because the occupying force wanted to count us all and we had to go to the city where Joseph had come from.

Not much joy on that journey. I was almost full term. I couldn't walk much so had to travel a lot of the way on a donkey, poor donkey.

Crowds of people on the road, Bethlehem was frantic, more people, no where to stay and the contractions had started, this baby was coming whether we were ready or not.

An innkeeper had pity on me due to my condition, and found us a place to stay, in the cow shed out the back, but at least it was dry and warm. We made do, settled down for the night and then the baby started to come, born there in the night and we put some clean straw in the animal feeding trough and laid him there, wrapped him in some old clothes.

Then in the morning we had some visitors, shepherds from up in the hills. The joy they had filled the shed.

Finally, I felt I could rest and ponder all that had happened. It was then that I began to really feel the joy. Much more happened to my little boy and I but that is a story for another day.

I have learnt that our fears can be overcome. I know that we can experience joy even in the midst of confusion, upheaval, suffering and chaos.

My little boy brought joy to many even before he was born. How amazing that God can use the little, the insignificant, the unexpected to change the world.

Joy is transformative.