

Joy is All Around

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on December 14th, 2025, Advent 3 (Isaiah 35:1-10, Luke 1:46b-55))

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There will be joy in Bethlehem this year. For the first time in two years Bethlehem is open for Christmas. In the midst of fragile cease fires and after much tragedy, the little town of Bethlehem will light its Christmas tree. I can't imagine the kind of joy that will bring to the people living there and any visitors who stop by.

At this time of the year, we have many signs of joy around us. Myers Christmas windows, Christmas lights throughout our neighbourhood, festive music playing everywhere, reruns of Christmas films on the TV, amazingly wrapped gifts, photos with Santa in the shopping centres, Christmas parties, children laughing and getting excited. Joy is all around us.

So why are so many people depressed, anxious, frazzled, lonely? Many are doing it tough; do they experience such joy or is this time of the year full of worry? We know at this time of the year the domestic violence statistics will soar. So, is joy actually around us? Or are we just papering over the cracks? Perhaps we have misunderstood joy. Perhaps we too easily equate it with happiness and positive thinking.

Isaiah paints an amazing picture of joy. Isaiah is writing in a time when the people were really struggling. Discouraged, far from home in exile, feeling hopeless and exhausted. Into this context Isaiah shares a vision of restoration, a vision of joy, a vision of hope that God's reign was breaking through in the here and now despite how things felt. His vision of joy was a statement of faith in a God who is with them and is transforming the world around.

Let's remind ourselves of part of this vision of hope – the desert shall blossom and water will flow, weak hands and feeble knees will be strengthened, eyes of the blind and ears of the deaf will be opened, the lame will leap, and those unable to speak will shout with joy and the people will return home. (Isaiah 35:1-10). This is restoration, this is renewal, this is transformation, this cuts right through to the core and not just some kind of sentimental happiness, this is deep, deep joy. This is a powerful statement in the midst of struggle.

In our second reading Mary has had an unexpected and life changing encounter. And her response to such an encounter with God is to sing, to sing a song of joy.

Young, pregnant and unmarried she runs away from the scandal to be with her older cousin Elizabeth in the hills. A tricky situation, but in the midst of it all she sings. She knows that her encounter with God will change the world forever. She lives in a world that is patriarchal where women were not worth much and had few rights. She lives under occupation. She lives with many who are oppressed. And in that context, she sings her song of joy, her song of hope, her faith that God indeed is transforming the world, and she may just be about to play a part in that.

Let's remind ourselves of her vision of joy, she sings of her certainty that God's mercy will go for generations, that God will keep his promises and that proud will be scattered, the powerful will be brought down and in a reversal, the little people will be lifted up, the hungry will be fed and those who have exploited and gained from the poor and

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oppressed will be sent away without anything. A song of joy, a song of protest, a song of revolution. (Luke 1:50-55)

The kind of joy that Isaiah and Mary envisage and hope for is of a completely different order to that which we associate with joy. Their vision of joy is not just happiness, being glad and contented, their kind of joy is active, is radical, is subversive.

This kind of joy was known and expressed in many who have lived through difficult times and struggles. African Americans sang it in their spirituals. Latin Americans express it in their liberation theology that speaks of a God whose future has begun, even in the midst of their struggles.

True joy is ...¹

Knowing that nothing can separate you from the love of God

Believing that God's reign is breaking into our history

Declaring that the current pain and suffering in the world will not have the last word, especially as we stand up for what is right.

Not buckling to fear.

Not the absence of pain but courage in the face of it.

Is resilient and refuses despair

Expresses solidarity with the suffering rather than just being an inward virtue

Enables endurance in tough times

Declares that the powerful do not define reality, even if they think they do.

Revolutionary.

Delights in the work of healing and restoration.

Knows that beauty still exists even in the ruins surrounding us.

An unwavering belief that God is making all things new.

Henri Nouwen said 'Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day.'

Joy is all around us. It is in the serenity of the sky, the exuberance of spring, in those who stand up for justice, those who make for peace, the wonder in a child's eyes, the magnificence of the ocean, the song of the magpie.

Real joy is found by allowing ourselves to be surrounded by the generous and all-encompassing love of God.

This advent may you all know deep joy in the knowledge that in the birth of Jesus, in the very act of God coming into the world to pitch his tent amongst us, that God is indeed present with us no matter what happens, that God will keep his promises and that God is constantly transforming our world with peace and love and joy. Amen.

¹ Much of this is taken from 'Recovering the Heart of Advent' by Peace Catalyst International.