

"Bah! Humbug!" says Ebenezer Scrooge in response to his nephew's wishes for a merry Christmas in Charles Dickens' famous novel. When his nephew argues the point, Scrooge replies: *"Merry Christmas! What right have you to be merry? What reason have you to be merry? You're poor enough."* "Come, then," returns the nephew: *"What right have you to be dismal? What reason have you to be morose? You're rich enough."* And of course the nephew concludes with his famous line about Christmas, *"Therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say God bless it!"*

You have to wonder if Dickens wasn't inspired directly by the words of Mary, the mother Jesus in the words she spoke while pregnant with Jesus in "The Magnificat" we just sung. In both Dickens and the Gospel we hear of joy even when there is cause for sorrow and we witness the turning upside of the order of things under God's reign. Mary, unwed, poor, and pregnant, subject to ridicule and rejection by her peers sings not of sorrow or self-pity but says, *"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.... for the Lord has looked with favor upon his lowly servant. God has shown the strength of his arm, and has scattered the proud in their conceit, cast down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty."* (Scrooge being a fitting symbol of that kind of emptiness.)

Both stories are a reminder that our joy and our strength in this life come not from our external context or situation in life but from something much deeper...it is the Christ in Christmas for Scrooge's nephew, and it is God in Christ incarnate for Mary.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent, Rose Sunday, and the theme of this week is joy, coming from the Latin term, "Gaudete." We light the pink candle today because our Advent waiting is nearly over, like the pink hue in the sky at dawn just before the sun rises and shines and casts away all the darkness. Today we too are invited to embrace joy. And yet we're all aware of how difficult and challenging it can be to find joy at times. Some of us find ourselves in the throes of grief, suffering, or illness. Many of us suffer silently from things we cannot easily share with others. And the holidays can be a very challenging and painful time. Meanwhile a quick glance at the news and we are bombarded with scenes of war, tragedy, violence, racism, and fear, not to mention economic threats and,

even worse, global threats in the midst of what is a terribly divided nation. And so we're justified in asking how can we possibly find joy in the midst of such turmoil? What place does joy even have in this context? It's a fair question.

Let's look for a moment at the meaning of joy as given to us in Scripture. The word being used by Mary is a Greek word meaning to be exceedingly filled with a deep gladness, it's an overabundance of rejoicing. Joy is not at all the same as happiness. Happiness is a mood and a feeling but it does not carry the depth of joy. Joy in the Scriptural sense is fundamentally rooted in what God has done and is doing in and through us. This is revealed in Peter's first epistle in chapter 1 when he writes: *"In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials."* You see, joy can be experienced even in times of deep sadness and loss. Perhaps you have experienced this very thing in your life – I know I have.

And the context that Mary and later John the Baptist and Jesus find themselves in is anything but happy, peaceful, or stable. The Israelites were living under the oppressive rule of the Roman government and many felt like exiles in their own country. The nation was terribly divided and fractured- four different groups were fighting for power and control and there were genuine movements towards revolution. Riots were commonplace. Violence was the norm. And Herod, their ruler, who too was under the thumb of Rome, was a tyrant, seeking to deceive and exterminate anyone who threatened whatever power he held. It was a very dark time.

And so it is in this context that we find Mary being approached by the angel with the invitation to bear the Christ child. Notice that this invitation required Mary's choice- her consent, which she gives freely despite the consequences to herself. We also find Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, who had suffered from infertility her entire life, finally pregnant in old age with John the Baptist. During the meeting of Elizabeth and Mary while they are pregnant we read that they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Joy itself is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. These women had every reason to be afraid and to despair of hope given their contexts and situations in life. Yet God was doing something behind the scenes in the midst of it all – working in and through these women and their sons to change the world.

We witness the beginnings of God's peaceful revolution in our Gospel story today when the imprisoned John the

Baptist sends his followers to inquire what Jesus is up to. Jesus responds, *“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”* Jesus is fulfilling the very words that Mary proclaimed in the Magnificat months before his birth, years before his ministry began.

There's a beautiful carol that dates back to the medieval era written by an unknown author entitled the “Seven Joys of Mary.” Each of the joys of Mary are rooted in Jesus' acts of healing and mercy: Healing the lame, giving sight to the blind, raising the dead, and dying for the sake of love. As one verse reads *“The next good joy that Mary had, It was the joy of three; To see her own Son Jesus Christ, Making the blind to see. Making the blind to see, Good Lord; And joyful may we be; Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. To all eternity. “*

No matter what you may be experiencing this season and no matter the chaos and challenges that surround us in our world right now, Rose Sunday and our Scripture lessons remind us that God is with us, there is cause for hope and joy because God is at work in the world, working in and through ordinary people like you and I who are the hands and body of Christ. There is cause for rejoicing as God continues to turn the world's order and priorities upside down.

Recall the two gentlemen who come to Scrooge's office and say, *“a few of us are endeavouring to raise a fund to buy the Poor some meat and drink and means of warmth. We choose this time, because it is a time, of all others, when Want is keenly felt, and Abundance rejoices. What shall I put you down for?”*

“Nothing!” Scrooge replied.

“You wish to be anonymous?”

“I wish to be left alone,” said Scrooge. “Since you ask me what I wish, gentlemen, that is my answer. I don't make merry myself at Christmas and I can't afford to make idle people merry. I help to support the establishments (the poorhouses) -- they cost enough; and those who are badly off must go there.”

“Many can't go there; and many would rather die.”

“If they would rather die,” said Scrooge, “they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.””

Scrooge's order is the order and preference of many in the world.

Mary, Elizabeth, John the Baptist and Jesus witness to a very different order of things – in fact, a surprising reversal. Such a reversal is offensive to many but God's

subversion of this order is one that we can all participate in and ultimately find great joy in as the Holy Spirit fills us in seeking God's kingdom and not our own.

The famous Hindu teacher Rabindranath Tagore wrote, *“I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy.”*

Advent is almost over. Christmas is nearly here. The light is entering the world and the darkness cannot overcome it. Rejoice!