

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“The Presence of Joy in the Holy”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore December 12, 2021

Reading

Luke 1:26-44, 56

And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.

And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.

And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?

And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy one which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible.

And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.

And the angel departed from her.

And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Juda; And entered into the house of Zacharias, and greeted Elisabeth. And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost: And she spoke out with a loud voice, and said,

Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy greeting sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy.

And Mary abode with her about three months and returned to her own house.

Spoken Meditation

Luke 1:46-55

The Magnificat

And Mary said,

My soul doth magnify the Lord,
 And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Deliverer.
 For he hath showed concern for his humble servant:
 for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
 For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name.
 And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.
 He hath showed strength with his arm;
 he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
 He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
 and exalted them of low degree.
 He hath filled the hungry with good things;
 and the rich he hath sent empty away.
 He hath held fast to his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy;
 As he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham
 and to his children forever.

Sermon

Mary doesn't get much attention in Protestant churches. Their patriarchal ministers find the Catholic reverence for Mary distracting from the main event: Jesus! Yes, Jesus needs a mother to be born in human form. But she doesn't deserve special attention in their theology, beyond being a vessel to create a child without Original Sin. The Church's attention, they argue, should go to the text of the Bible, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and his resurrection from the dead.

This is not how Unitarian Universalists approach Mary. Today I'd like to work with the traditional text from Luke I read that describes how Jesus was conceived and Mary's affirmation from her relative Elizabeth. Let me assure you I'm not arguing for the *content* of the narrative, that Jesus didn't have an earthly father. Many are familiar with this text because it is often read and sung this time of year. I bring it to you today because it's structure and narrative form have something to teach us about joy and something to teach us about the Presence of the Holy.

First, I ask your indulgence to take a little interpretive liberty with the term “Holy Ghost.” The Greek word translated as Holy Ghost is *pneuma*. This is a lovely word that has several non-trinitarian translations that expand its meaning. *Pneuma* can also be translated as:

- life-giving energy
- the soul, the vital principal by which the body is animated
- the efficient source of any power, affection, emotion, desire
- a simple non-material essence possessed of the power of knowing, desiring, deciding, and acting
- a rational spirit, the power by which the human being feels, thinks, decides
- in Hebrew the parallel term is “*ruwach*” which means “life giving breath” or spirit, vivacity, vigor, animation

Many Unitarian Universalists today use the word “holy” to translate *pneuma and ruwach* along these lines. This more flexible translation points at this vital animating principle that separates the lived experience of human beings from other less evolved life forms and non-living matter. We leave open the question as to its source, be it naturally occurring, or God given. The Biblical translation defines it as having the personhood of God. Unitarian Universalists again do not take a position on this. We are very attentive though to **how** it arises and functions in human form. And Luke’s narrative has much to teach us about how the presence of joy arises **in relation to** the holy.

The transmission of life to a potentially new human being is an amazing, awesome process. Given the tremendous complexity of the initial cell division and differentiation, there is no single moment to pinpoint and say, life begins. The egg and sperm are alive when they meet. The fertilized egg is the continuation of two living entities joined together as one. Life is conserved and expanded. The animating principle is always present, but its presence grows with time as the zygote becomes a fetus, the fetus becomes a baby, and the baby grows into a child and then an adult. Rather than this animating energy being absent or present, it can also have a magnitude, a strength, a power that can wax and wane. The presence of joy might be described as its intensification, growth, and development. In eastern traditions, it might be compared with prana or chi.

With this context, let’s go to the text now, but let us read and analyze it the way we might read a myth or a fairy tale. When scholars read about Achilles binding himself to the mast so he can hear the Siren’s sing in the *Illiad*, we don’t worry about whether that happened or not. We enjoy the story and look for meaning in it. That’s just what we’ll do with this text. Mary is betrothed to Joseph and living what we might consider an ordinary life without a lot of excitement. I imagine her anticipating a mundane householder’s life serving her husband as a wife, mother, subsistence farmer, cook, animal tender, and observant Jew keeping a Kosher kitchen. The last thing she anticipates is conversing with an angel.

Here is our first lesson: the experience of the Holy is often a surprise and unexpected. This unanticipated heavenly being steps into her life with a message:

Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

Here is our second lesson: the presence of joy through the Holy is grounded in affirmation. Mary isn't just a good woman; she is highly favored by God. God is with her now whether she is aware of it or not. She's not just any woman, she is blessed among all women. Mary gets this overwhelming message of her significance and value. I know getting that kind of affirmation would make my day.

Yet Mary is troubled by it. I can imagine how overwhelming it would be for an angel to show up in front of you and start praising you. She gets another affirmation from the angel and something else, a commission:

Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favor with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

Not only is she favored, she also is being given a task, a mission, a purpose to fulfill. Joy often arises from having a clearly defined and meaningful purpose. Human beings hunger for meaningful purpose. I think this is why disasters are so exciting. People have a new purpose that is clearly defined to help one another. The moment defines common purpose, and the mind becomes undistracted. This is one of the satisfactions of being a first responder to a fire or to a medical emergency.

Yet Mary is still troubled:

How shall this be, she asks, seeing I know not a man?

Usually, a commission comes with challenges. Meaningful purpose will have obstacles to overcome. The way may seem difficult, even impossible. This is the archetype of the hero's journey, having a goal that seems unattainable. Reaching the goal doesn't happen by our own power alone. Help comes from outside the self. Great joy is released by achieving that goal with aid that transcends us.

The angel describes how the impossible will be achieved:

The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy one which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.

Mary is going to have direct access to the source of the animating principle of life itself. Wow. Let's not get hung up here worrying how literally a holy sperm is going to penetrate one of Mary's eggs. The ancients didn't think about life that way. This is a direct transmission of the source of life to Mary. Along with the commission and the challenge comes with help of the principle of life, the Spirit of Life if you will, from beyond us that is also within us. The Spirit of Life in us is magnified and that presence releases tremendous joy.

Another critical component of this story comes next. God doesn't treat Mary like a slave ordering her into God's service to be the conduit of Jesus into the world. Mary consents in these words:

be it unto me according to thy word.

The presence of joy also needs willing agency. Mary accepts the commission, the challenge and the support to accomplish God's will.

But Mary doesn't do it alone. She accepts her Cousin Elizabeth's affirmation and support. She goes to be with Elizabeth who is already well along in her pregnancy. The recognition of it leaping in her womb (which I've got to imagine might have been uncomfortable) reveals to her that Mary is also carrying a special child. A real-world person has recognized and affirmed her too. Mary is not on her own all by herself dealing with an unanticipated pregnancy, she has Elizabeth's and Elizabeth's household's support for three months.

Mary's presence of joy is supported through her relationships.

The unexpected arrival of the angel, the affirmation of her, the commission and challenge, the support and her loving relationships swell in her as the presence of joy. She exclaims in verse one of the earliest hymns of praise in the Christian tradition, the Magnificat, I read as our spoken meditation.

My proposition this morning is Mary's story can be a model of a way the Holy can operate in human life that gives us access to the presence of the holy. The story highlights the means through which the Holy can operate. The presence of joy is the sign that the Holy is at work in us.

This was true for me when I recognized my call to ministry. My employer at the time, North Star Computers, was collapsing as the IBM XT was taking its market for micro-computers. Before finishing my Electrical Engineering and Computer Science degree at UC Berkeley, I had worked as an electronic technician for Hewlett Packard. I was devoted to Hewlett Packard as a good employer. I applied for a job at their Santa Rosa division and got offered a position as a test engineer, my dream job before returning to school.

Yet something held me back from saying yes to this offer. I didn't understand why I didn't immediately jump and say yes.

At the same time, I was in a dream analysis group with a Unitarian Universalist minister, Jeremy Taylor. We met at his beautiful home in Marin County. The night I was considering that job offer had been an especially meaningful night. The participants explored their inner life through the dreams they shared. The group felt so close and intimate as tears of inner recognition were shed and personal insights were discovered. We recognized the Holy, the Spirit of Life, moving in each other.

Driving home, singing joyfully to myself with a sense of deep satisfaction being part of the process of the group and being able to contribute to it, looking out over the lights of Berkeley from the elevated highway, I suddenly knew what was holding me back. I had to answer the building desire in me to explore and pursue the experience of the Holy I felt in that group. My next step wasn't a new job but rather to attend Starr King School for the Ministry. I felt called to allow that training to shape me into service as a minister, to be a facilitator of the experience of the Holy that can lead to the presence of Joy.

The unexpected call to ministry, the commission to train at Starr King, the challenge of reorienting my life from a technical vocation to human and sacred service, began a process. It was a process

that hasn't felt so much directed by my will but supported by what is beyond it. No one becomes a Unitarian Universalist minister without a lot of affirmation from people who recognize the Holy, the spirit at work in them. For me, that happened most strongly in my internship in Rochester, New York. It continues with your affirmation and guidance as your minister.

The assurance comes in the experience of the presence of joy through serving as a minister. Even when things are difficult, as they are right now with COVID, that joy of service doesn't fade.

So, this morning, I encourage you to reflect on the Annunciation as a model for how the Holy arrives in your life often in unexpected ways. The ways you experience affirmation through it, the ways it commissions your work in a challenging world, the supports all around you to move on those commissions including vitally important affirming relationships, groups and communities.

And if that gets confusing, may the presence of joy be your guide that you are on the right path.

Benediction

By Wendell Berry

I dream of a quiet man
who explains nothing and defends
nothing, but only knows
where the rarest wildflowers
are blooming, and who goes,
and finds that he is smiling
not by his own will.