

# Defiant joy

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 13 December, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Gareth Thomas-Burchell

Advent 3B

**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Contemporary reading: Joy and Sorrow  
by Khalil Gibran, Chapter VII; John 1:6-8, 19-28**

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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In preparation for this third Sunday of Advent, I have been contemplating the theme of “Waiting for Joy”. And upon reading all of the passages of scripture for today, I have been steered into thinking contextually about the nature of joy.

What was going on when the writers wrote the scriptures that we have just heard? And indeed, Khalil Gibran.

All of the situations were ones when the people were experiencing some form of vulnerability and challenge. In Isaiah, the scene is the recent return to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon of the Israelite people and facing the reconstruction of their destroyed city.

The gospel of John speaks of the identity of John the Baptist and the self-revealing of his identity. And at the end of this sermon, I will read from Luke the words of Mary as she sings out the Magnificat in her unique experience of vulnerability and wonder.

All of the scripture passages today come from situations of adversity and with expressions of joy in the face of difficulty and challenge. It was indeed, Defiant Joy.

Defiant joy is the joy that sings and dances despite the threats of opposition. It is the joy that says, I will be joyful in the face of difficulty, and at the risk of being rude myself, it is the joy that will ‘stick it up the noses’ of those who attempt to prevent, constrict and imprison.

So, from the start, let us understand the context of joy from today’s scripture. It is not smarmy joy, or the joy that is diluted with feeling happy with good fortune. It is not the joy that is reduced to the niceness of an occasion. It is not the joy that is expressed after a worship service of favourite hymns. It is not the joy of praying for and getting a great parking spot, it is not even the joy of looking forward to Christmas. This type of joy runs deep and defiant.

And because the people were not anticipating the birth of Christ at this time, they were joyful nonetheless.

Defiant joy is the snarly joy of determination, it is the joy of not being sure, it is the joy of wonder, it is the joy of confusion between the emotions of laughing and crying and not sure what to say and what to do.

It is the joy of wondering what comes next. It is the joy that teeters between fear and longing.

The story goes of a young woman from America who had volunteered to help out at one of the refugee camps in Central America. By her self-admission, she confessed to a conversation she had with a group of some women in the camp, who were working and laughing together in the refugee camp.

She asked why it was that the women were laughing amidst their captivity and squalor ... she said she did not understand. She thought that the women should be miserable all the time.

That is defiant joy. It is the same reason that women become pregnant while being refugees, because they feel the responsibility to be agents of hope for the continuity of future generations. They might be in a refugee camp, but becoming pregnant and having children in a refugee camp is, in itself, an act of hope and anticipation for their children's future freedom. That is defiant joy.

And that is the situation we step into with the scriptures today. Let us look at John the Baptist.

John the Baptist was quite an eccentric by the measurement of what most people understand as 'normal'. But then again, any person who speaks out what they believe to be the truth, without any of those polite filters of social acceptance can be seen as weird, or indeed, we might say, courageous. Most prefer to fit in to normal ... whatever that is.

John the Baptist did not care for normal, especially if it got in the way of speaking out the truth. And the truth that he spoke out, was pointing to the person of Jesus Christ.

Palestine at the time was under the brutality of Roman occupation, and also experiencing the insipid expression of religious leadership and the selfish clinging to power by Herod.

For the hierarchy of Palestine, maintaining political, religious and social power was the aim during Roman occupation. If you were in a position of privilege, the idea was to maintain it, but if you had no position, you would want change.

Life for the ordinary folk was hardly more than an existence, survival was a challenge, and prosperity was near impossible – unless you were a cheat. Deliverance from that existence was a dream, and the weird man dressed in camel hair was pointing to hope, and that could not be controlled, even by the might of the Roman Empire.

John the Baptist, in all his strangeness and austerity, was the one sent by God to preach the Good News. And the people flocked, not only to hear him, but also to repent and to be baptised. The people wanted and were ready for transformation. They were ready! They craved a life free of fear of the Romans, a life removed from predictable sameness and captive routine, a life that offered hope and courage. They wanted to have reason to express defiant joy.

This joy that opposes the present status-quo of many issues that our world faces, is expressed well in one of my favourite Advent songs. It is called "Advent News" and is composed and written by Donald Schmidt in 2002 – quite recently. I will say it, I won't sing it.

*Sing a song of praise and glory  
to the one who came to be.  
Word of wisdom born among us,  
child of God to set us free. (x2)*

God's dream for creation  
is coming to birth,  
changes are happening  
all over the earth.  
Swords into plough-shares and  
tools out of spears,  
peace breaking out both far and near.

The deserts will blossom and  
God's justice will grow.  
At the sound of God's healing  
waters will flow.  
Animals everywhere will  
start a new trend:  
those who were enemies now will be friends.

My heart bursts with praise  
for the God who has done  
wonderful things for everyone!  
The proud are brought down and the  
humble stand tall.  
Peace on earth, goodwill to all.

*Words and music: Donald Schmidt © 2002 Donald Schmidt*

There are many songs that have been composed this century that bear consideration to play and sing that cut to the essence of what we care about today, and in a language today that is understood by everyone. This particular song, I think, expresses the essence of the message of Advent.

Allow me again to quote Debie Thomas, whom I quoted a couple of weeks ago in her essay for this week. She writes:

*The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally called "Gaudete" or "Rejoice" Sunday. (I think I've pronounced that right, for those who speak French). In many churches, the penitential purple of the season is put aside this weekend, in favour of a lighter, happier rose. (You might see the pinkish coloured candle that has been lit today.) Most of the lectionary readings emphasise celebration, anticipation, and joy.*

She continues:

*This feels right to me, given our Gospel. We do tap into joy when we rightly understand who we are in the kingdom and economy of God. New life and fresh joy well up when we align our self-understanding to God's calling, and recognise that we, like John, are meant to point away from ourselves, towards Jesus. Joy surprises us when we decide to forge paths in the wilderness, when we make way in difficult places for someone greater than ourselves. Joy multiplies when we level oppression, injustice, and suffering, so that all flesh can see God together.*

And lastly. This third Sunday of Advent, we hear the words of rejoicing that Mary spoke to Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. Mary had just discovered that she was pregnant and her response is clear and has her singing out with candid honesty that belies any caution in the current political climate. She sings it out! Her words of joy are abundantly carefree in her response to becoming pregnant, but according to the Gospel of Luke, he has her quoting Hebrew Scripture from another context of deliverance.

Both Mary, the mother of Jesus, and John the Baptist, stand alongside each other in different contexts to speak out words of hope and justice and joy. This is the cry of the people who seek transformation and change. Both Mary and John the Baptist point away from themselves, and the words they speak are not about them. Their words are about God, and how God can make a difference in the lives of all people. Defiant joy!

The invitation, therefore, is not only to take on board the message of hope and joy for ourselves, but also to speak out with the same courage and candidness of John the Baptist and Mary. Words of hope and transformation will always seem crazy amidst a world that is facing new challenges to both health and peace and change in our world today.

The question is, what are your words of hope and joy in your world? What are your words that may fly in the face of the reality around you? To what are you pointing in this season of Advent as we all prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus? What are you prepared to do to express defiant joy?

So let us hear the words that Mary spoke as a prayer for inspiration.

From Luke Chapter 1:

*1:46b "My soul magnifies the Holy One, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,*

*1:48 for God has looked with favour on the lowliness of this servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;*

*1:49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name.*

*1:50 God's mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation.*

*1:51 God has shown strength with God's arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

*1:52 God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;*

*1:53 God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

*1:54 God has helped God's servant Israel, in remembrance of God's mercy,*

*1:55 according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*