

Advent 4, December 20, 2020  
Receiving God's Deepest Gift of Joy  
Luke 1:26-38, 46b-55  
Farmville Baptist Church  
Tracy Hartman

Last week we heard the poetic words of the first chapter of the gospel of John and the first chapter of Genesis. We stepped back and placed the birth of Jesus within the whole arc of God's work across space and time. This morning, in the first chapter of the gospel of Luke, the angel Gabriel breaks into a very specific place and time – first century Nazareth – with a message for a very specific person, Mary. Not only is Gabriel's message specific, it is strange, almost unbelievable. Gabriel tells Mary that God has chosen her to bear the Christ Child. We know the story well. After an understandable moment of puzzlement, "How can this be?" Mary offers one of the greatest statements of faith in all of Scripture, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Reflecting on Mary, Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Mary wins her place in history not for her cleverness, nor for her beauty, nor even for her goodness. She becomes the most important woman in the world simply because she is willing to say yes to an angel's strange proposal -- without a clue where it will lead her. In doing so, she becomes the example for all of us who are also invited to bear God into the world." But Mary's favor with God is a two-edged sword, isn't it, her assignment is an honor yoked with struggle. She comprehends that her life, and everyone else's is about to be overturned and rearranged. Taylor continues, "Mary gives us one of the best examples I know of a faithful response to an unforeseen and unlikely – and uninvited – circumstance of life: "Let it be to me according to thy word." Isn't this is the first ingredient of a faithful response – to say yes to God even though we have no clue where it will lead?

The first place it led Mary was to visit her Aunt Elizabeth. Did she go because she wanted to witness this unlikely news herself? Was she overwhelmed by her own news and needing someone she could trust to process it with? Did she go to get away from the prying eyes and wagging tongues in Galilee? We don't for sure, but the visit brings great joy to both Mary and Elizabeth. For Elizabeth, joy comes as John the Baptist – leaps for joy in her womb when Mary arrives. She is filled with the Holy Spirit and cries to Mary, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

Mary experiences joy and sings the Magnificat, her song of praise to God. Listen to those beautiful words now: “My soul magnifies the Lord,

- <sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
 and holy is his name.  
<sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him  
 from generation to generation.  
<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm;  
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.  
<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
 and lifted up the lowly;  
<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things,  
 and sent the rich away empty.  
<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,  
 in remembrance of his mercy,  
<sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
 to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

The knowledge of what God is doing calls Mary to worship – despite the challenging circumstances she finds herself in. She experiences great joy and expresses it to God. (PAUSE)  
 Then she prophesies about what God's new work will mean for the world. She sings a blessing

for the oppressed – whether they are under or over privileged – she uses the language of revolution to record her understanding of the reversals that will unfold. What are these reversals? God scatters the prideful, God brings down the powerful and lifts up those without status and rights, and God fills the hungry and send the rich away with nothing. In her prophecy, Mary calls us to be change agents for a better world for all, she calls us to bring joy to those who don't often experience it.

As always, we ask the question, what might this mean in our day? At the Triune Mercy Center in Greenville, SC, it means everything. Triune Mercy center is a vibrant -- and sometimes messy -- church where rich, poor and those in between worship and serve together. Early one recent Sunday, a few hours before worship, a young man in a heavy camouflage coat and pants sat alone in the fellowship hall. It wasn't his first time at the church, but he hadn't been there enough to know anyone well. Before long, a passing staff member stopped to give him a new pair of winter gloves and asked whether he could stick around to help clean up after the noon meal. And after worship and lunch, there he was, waiting quietly off to the side, ready to help as soon as the last diners finished eating. This is how Triune ministers, at once serving people and drawing them into the fold.

This fold is pastored by Rev. Deb Richardson-Moore who is in her 11th year as pastor at Triune, a nondenominational church near downtown Greenville, An independent nonprofit housed in a former United Methodist church building, Triune is known for the network of services it offers the poor. But its heartbeat is *relationship*: with Jesus, with pastors and staff, with other parishioners and with volunteers from the community.

Whatever choices or struggles lead people into homelessness, they won't be alone at Triune. Here, lawyers sit beside addicts, the rich beside the destitute. About a quarter of the

congregation are people who are homeless, another quarter are working poor, and half are middle and upper class. They sing together, pray together and walk out talking together.

In the season of Advent and Christmas, Triune is a vivid example of “incarnational ministry,” a hint of what Immanuel -- “God with us” -- might look like. But it hasn’t always been that way. Pastor Richardson-Moore came to the church straight out of seminary. A Greenville native, she was a reporter for The Greenville News for 27 years before sensing a call to the ministry. In her first months as a pastor, she questioned that call daily -- sometimes hourly. “It was so awful,” she said. “It was the worst year of my life.” Incarnational ministry, she discovered, is messy stuff. She didn’t understand the people, and they were suspicious of her. She spent most of her time responding to an endless stream of strangers who were looking for food or clothes. She was spat on and lied to. She was devastated by fights and disorganization and the presence and even sale of drugs at the church. “For a long time, there wasn’t a lot of joy here,” Richardson-Moore said. “But there is now.”

The change came so gradually that it took her a while to realize she was no longer looking for an escape. Today, Triune draws not only people who are homeless but also lawyers, businesspeople and artists who come because they want to be part of what is happening there. “They see the gospel being lived out,” Richardson-Moore said. “You just can’t get around it -- Jesus told us to serve the poor.” James H. “Chip” Price III, a Greenville lawyer, first came as a volunteer offering free legal advice. Then he became a mentor in one of Triune’s support circles. And now he’s a church member, worshipping on Sundays alongside the people he serves during the week. Before he set foot inside, he’d known Triune only as “the homeless church.” “But it’s so much more than that,” Price said. “It is an active, vibrant church with an active congregation.”

Triune Mercy Center is first a place of worship, Richardson-Moore said. And on Sunday mornings in the sanctuary, that's what it feels like, stained-glass windows, choir robes, sermon and all. The rest of the week, it's a thriving hub of ministries, with many of the same people from the Sunday services side by side again -- some serving, some being served. The church offers four hot meals a week and provides job counseling, housing assistance and more. Homeless parishioners can do laundry, get legal advice or have a dental or eye exam. They can see a nurse, pick up groceries or have their bikes fixed.

But those are just a beginning, not an end. Richardson-Moore wants to get to hearts. She and others work to identify the problems that bring desperate people to Triune. Often, they find addiction; other times, mental illness. Solutions depend first on a willingness to change. And they require an environment of trusting relationships, built over time.

That's the kind of connection Charles Hester has with Richardson-Moore and Karen Eller, the associate pastor at Triune. He said the two women rescued him. "I've got some powerful ladies in this church that prayed over me," Hester told his Sunday school class recently. "I know how powerful prayer can be." He's been coming to Triune for two years. In that time, he's been in and out of housing, including stints in Greenville's infamous "Tent City" -- and has struggled on and off with alcohol. He quit drinking again about three months ago and now lives at the Greenville Rescue Mission.

A fixture in Triune's art room, Hester now focuses on painting, and hopes to sell enough pieces to pay his bills. He does landscapes and portraits, subjects from real life and from his head -- like a new piece with Jesus wrapping his arms around an addict, bottles and paraphernalia scattered on the ground. Not long ago, he sold three paintings in a week. Hester has high praise for the church and its pastor. "She honestly cares about homeless people," he said.

Recently, Richardson-Moore has been trying to figure out how to deal with a member who has been serving in the church but now seems to be back on drugs. Should she let the

member keep serving, so he or she can still hear the gospel and be challenged to change? Or put her foot down? “I guess I feel like the alternative -- ‘Don’t come in here’ -- is worse,” she said. It’s a constant balancing act, “to provide hospitality without enabling addiction,” she said.

Her understanding of this balance has developed over the last decade. In the beginning, Triune practiced mostly open-ended, no-strings giving. But then Richardson-Moore began to learn that gifts -- such as clothes from a free closet -- can sometimes be currency to feed addiction. She saw that taking care of physical needs without addressing heart needs wouldn’t lead to meaningful change.

Over time, Richardson-Moore said, the church became believers in the notion of “toxic charity” - - the idea that people can be harmed when their needs are provided.

The ministry is more thoughtful now. It doesn’t have an endless supply of food for someone who isn’t working or trying to work. And while no one is ever turned away from worship, those who fight or break other rules can get a 30-day suspension from the art room, meals and other opportunities.

Richardson-Moore knows that many people who come to Triune are looking, at least initially, for groceries or a coat, medical care or a few minutes of warmth. “But they’re met with real-life transformational possibilities,” she said.

A typical weekday starts with a literal prayer circle linking everyone hand in hand around the room. Then, people who have signed up for groceries wait their turn to meet with an intake manager. Staff and volunteers listen to life stories and help identify possible resources at Triune or elsewhere in the community. The room is swarming as people write cards home, have their blood pressure checked or wait to meet with a lawyer. No one wears a name tag. By design, nothing distinguishes staff from volunteer, church family from community help.

Triune has 11 full- and part-time staff members. Between 80 and 100 people, from Triune and beyond, regularly volunteer at the church. Another 1,500 from partner churches help prepare and serve the four hot meals offered every week. “We try to level the playing field, making everyone equal and valued,” Richardson-Moore said.

Triune doesn’t just support people who are poor or homeless. It offers purpose and dignity by treating them like any other church member. “This is also your church, so you come here and work too,” Richardson-Moore said. Each Sunday morning, she handpicks a parishioner to lead the responsive reading. Another staff member chooses ushers. Because nobody knows who will show up week to week, the church doesn’t have a prearranged schedule of who serves in worship. But Richardson-Moore wants the faces leading and serving to reflect the breadth of Triune’s family. This congregation embodies a quote from the PBS series “Call the Midwife” – Often the hands of God are found at the end of your own arms. They offer all of God’s deepest gifts to all of their members.

May it be so with each of us and all of this Advent season, may we receive God’s deepest gift of joy – whatever our circumstances, and then may we offer it prophetically to those God calls us to serve.

Closing prayer (by Nikki Finkelstein Blair)

Welcome, child of jubilation,  
 you for whom the way is made ready,  
 of whom the messenger brings good news,  
 for whom the angels are already rehearsing their Glorias.

In this season, when joy  
 (to the world) means no more than  
 the fulfillment of wish lists,  
 the mountains of wrapped parcels under the tree,  
 remind us that the joy you give  
 is not in attaining but in releasing  
 not in storing up but in letting go  
 not in getting everything we want but  
 in giving all that we have

so that everyone  
may be filled with good things.

In this season, when joy  
(to the world) may be a dream,  
disturbed by real life with its howling grief,  
anger, fear, isolation,  
let us know the joy you give  
with its quiet comfort,  
calm, assurance, community.

Where joy is silenced by hunger,  
teach us to nourish in your name.

Where joy is crushed by heartbreak,  
give us gentle hands to offer your healing.

Where joy seems to belong only to the powerful,  
give us courage to break down thrones.

Keep us focused on what you intend for us:  
joy always, prayer unending, and thanks  
no matter what.

Welcome, child of jubilee, joy-bringer.  
We open the door to you!