

Joy in the Wilderness
Isaiah 35:1-10 Luke 1:46b-55

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Maris and I were playing Monopoly recently. This was Maris' first time playing. And someone went bankrupt. And there were tears. It was not a joyful experience. I explained to Maris that in this game, the easiest way to make money is to have money in the first place. The more money you have, the more you can make off your opponent. The less money you have, the easier it is for your opponent to gouge you for rent and leave you with nothing. We play with the Pirates of the Caribbean Collector's Edition so it's easy to say, "Well, pirates just want all the treasure, and they don't care about rules and other people, so they'll just steal and kill to get whatever they want, so that's why we're playing like this." The disturbing part is that this game was not meant to reflect the methods of seafaring pirates.

Monopoly was created by Lizzie Magie in 1903 to expose the effects of unregulated capitalism, essentially: the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. We probably remember learning about the robber barons of the late 1800's and early 1900's who were the inspiration for the Monopoly Man, along with the unsafe conditions and low wages for the factory workers off of whom those monopolists made their money. And perhaps we remember how life and liberation for all began to rise from that exploitative, death-dealing wilderness: anti-trust laws kept power and wealth from becoming too concentrated in the hands of the few, labor unions demanded the weekend and 40-hour work week, eventually the New Deal provided a social safety net so that no American would get left behind. The playing field was further leveled with the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act in the 1960's. Recalling these patterns in our own recent history, we might recall another point much further back in history when John the Baptist echoed Isaiah's message that all the mountains will be laid low and the valleys shall be lifted up.

And we might recall, from a point a little earlier than that, Mary's response when her cousin Elizabeth says, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Mary breaks out into a song that has been referred to as the Magnificat. Perhaps some of you have heard or sung these Latin words set to music by Bach or Vivaldi. Maybe, some of you with a Catholic background are familiar with these lines from vespers or evening prayers. I have a hard time imagining this song quieting anyone down for the night. It has a pretty revolutionary message. Mary begins with praise and thanksgiving from a personal point of view: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed." Then she goes into praise and thanksgiving for God's vision for the whole world: "He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

I think that's what joy in the wilderness must sound like. The Romans rule over the Jews with cruel force. And some Jews choose to align with their oppressors, scrambling for their own safety and wealth at the expense of their own neighbors. Herod the Great, a

narcissistic leader known for trying to make himself look great with gaudy building projects, is certainly one of these. We know how threatened he will feel by God's promise incarnate. And we know about his bloody, desperate act in response to his fear of losing power. As Rev. Dr. Cheryl A. Lindsay writes, "To those who ally themselves and compromise themselves to the kingdoms of this world, the kin-dom of God offers a nightmare rather than a cherished hope." So it has been through history and still is among powerful leaders and the super rich today. Mary's song is a protest song. And authorities have always shown up in force in response to protests, even peaceful ones. Protests demanding workers' rights, women's suffrage, racial justice, or simply a healthy democracy. And still, Mary, and those like her throughout the ages, refuse to give up their joy because they have seen God's equitable vision and they have faith that it is more than possible, it is unavoidable. And they will proclaim that vision and work toward that vision no matter how empire might crack down on them.

Professor of religion Debra Dean Murphy notes that the British Empire's East India Company took the Magnificat out of evening prayers because it was so threatening to their power as colonialists. The Magnificat was taken up as a manifesto in the 1970's by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina in response to their children being disappeared by the government. The Argentinian government banned all public recitations of the Magnificat, and the Guatemalan government did the same thing ten years later. Murphy writes, "Mary's fiery speech at the beginning of Luke's Gospel may be the appointed canticle for vespers, but it has also emboldened the colonized to resist their oppressors and the traumatized poor to claim for themselves God's preferential love."

Are we still singing Mary's song today? For many, these times certainly can feel like a barren wilderness with little nourishment and few oases in sight. Experts describe our current economy as being K-shaped. It's going great for those who already have money. They are doing better than ever and their prospects keep getting better. And it's devastating for those who are already struggling. It has been harder than ever to simply afford housing, food, and healthcare, and there is not much relief in sight under current policies and norms. This is the opposite of the economic vision that Mary proclaimed. And it's not by accident. Those efforts by our national community that strove to bring the mountains low and the valleys high have been intentionally chipped away at so the rich can get richer. While the poor get poorer. Just like the game of Monopoly, but with real lives at stake. It can be pretty difficult to remain hopeful and joyful for those who are in the line of the K economy whose trajectory is going down. It's easy to think that joy is for those who already hold a high place in the world's economy and whose trajectory still goes up.

But here's one of the things I learned from playing Monopoly. There's not a lot of true joy in winning that game. You have to put certain barriers around your heart to find the fleeting happiness of profiting at the expense of your neighbor. And that fleeting happiness is not the same as fulfillment, which might be a better word to associate with the joy of living according to God's economy. It's a feeling that stems from one's heart, not from outside circumstances. A feeling that comes from the nourishing beauty of what is possible, not from the death-dealing desert of the world as it is. A psychologist noted recently that in the social media posts and public appearances of one of the richest men of the world, there is no mention of those things that are typically associated with joy and

fulfillment. No connection with family or community. No mention of faith or gratitude. But plenty of hate and fearmongering. A real Herod the Great.

When I think of the joy that a person expects from destroying regulations that keep them from accumulating wealth and power, I think of the joy that a child expects from unregulated ice cream consumption in place of a nutritious dinner. It may seem like what they want, but they're going to end up with a nasty stomachache. Make a habit of that behavior, and they're going to experience even more complex health issues in the future. Likewise, Mary's song of casting down the mighty from their thrones and sending the rich away empty may feel threatening to the powerful wealthy's immediate happiness.

But does God mean to punish the powerful and wealthy, or does God mean to save them? What if God casts down the mighty because it's lonely up there and there is no possibility of true joy? I imagine the mighty being cast down, and the rest of the world catching and embracing them, because forgiveness is God's way too. I imagine the mighty having a true interdependent community for the first time, and the community joyfully tearing down the throne together, like people around the world who tear down statues dedicated to oppressive political and military leaders. The gold of the throne is melted down so that everyone can stand on a higher common ground. What if the rich are sent away empty because they have hoarded so much earthly treasure in their hearts that there is no room for God, no room for joy? What if this is a blessed opportunity for true fulfillment by giving their second cloak to someone who has none, just as John the Baptist instructs his followers to do?

Perhaps God's vengeance and terrible recompense is not for the mighty or rich people, but the systems that have made them mighty and rich at the expense of others. The psalmist writes, "God watches over the strangers, upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked, God brings to ruin." The way of the wicked God brings to ruin, not the wicked themselves. The way of the wicked, tempting with its promise of earthly treasures and worldly power, will never lead to salvation and liberation. But there is always hope for the wicked to turn around and travel, instead, The Holy Way. That way flourishing with life and echoing with shouts of joy. Where abundance for all means scarcity for none. May we experience such joy in the wilderness of our time. May we remember that God comes down on this earth to be with people suffering under violent oppression, to flip tables of exploitation and bring to ruin the wicked ways. May we dance along the Holy Way with shouts of joy this Advent season knowing that God's kin-dom of justice and equity is near.