

Advent Preparation

Refusing Joy Frankton – 12/7/14

Scripture: Luke 1.26-38 Mary and the Angel

Proposition: We're so stressed by trying to live right, eat right, think right, act right, speak right, parent right, exercise right, look right - that we've forgotten the joy of Jesus.

Christmas is a time of celebration, and a part of the festive fun, at least for Americans, is food. Our Thanksgiving-to-Christmas consumption of [SLIDE] goodies will most assuredly lead to a few extra pounds and a resolution to start the New Year with a diet. There's nothing wrong with dropping your excess holiday weight. I encourage you to do so. But in our heroin-chic, Barbie-doll culture, dieting has become a chronic obsession. This approach may have some health benefits, sure, but without a steady regimen of aerobic exercise you may be easing the load while slowly killing yourself. Killing yourself, that is, with stress.

There is kind of a "counter-cultural" author named Philip LeFebvre. He wrote the following about eating and stress: [Read] "You do realize, that if you stand in front of the pastry case at the coffee shop and calculating calories in your head, trying to figure out if a Christmas cookie is going to show up on your hips, you are actually doing more damage to your heart from the stress [of making the decision] than if you simply ate the darn cookie and allowed yourself to experience the joy of it, right? You do realize that happiness and personal acceptance are hundreds of times better for you than stressful self-denial, right?"

[SLIDE] Refusing joy is nothing less than a form of blasphemy. Vanity kills, as does stressful self-denial. Happiness produces endorphins that keep you healthy. And even if laughter isn't the best medicine, wouldn't you rather live 10 years in a bowl of ice cream than 100 years in a bag of rice cakes? The truth of the matter is that you can eat right, drink your bottled water, take your vitamins, get plenty of sleep, and still get hit by a bus. And after the bus hits you, there will be a bunch of gluttons looking out the windows at your tragically broken body who didn't think twice about eating that Christmas cookie.

So go ahead, relax - enjoy the holiday season. God has created a delicious world for us, and he wants us to experience joy! The song does not read: "Stress to the world, the Lord has come." Or, "Fret, worry, and fuss, the Lord has come." It's not like the archangel burst upon the shepherds and said, "Fear not, for today I bring you tidings of great stress - which shall be to all people." (You know, that's usually the way it works: when we're stressed, we bring our stress to all people - husband, wife, children, the family pet, friends and co-workers.) Instead, the good news the angel brought the shepherds was: [SLIDE] *I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people.* [LK 2.10]

Let's back the truck up and go back to the beginning of this story. Luke tells us that the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin named Mary, engaged to a man whose name was Joseph. In today's passage, the angel comes to her and says, [SLIDE] *Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you.* [28] This greeting contains an assurance of divine favor upon Mary and of God's power and presence in Mary's life, and is meant to inspire joy. But

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Mary is much perplexed by his words, as any of us would be, and she ponders what sort of greeting this might be. [29] You can just imagine her standing in front of the pastry case at some divine coffee shop, wondering what to think, what to feel, what to do. She is no doubt suffering some serious stress.

The angel continues: **[SLIDE]** *Don't be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God!* [30] He goes on to predict that she will bear a son named Jesus - one who will be great, the Son of the Most High, the heir of David and the ruler of an everlasting kingdom. The child will be conceived by the Holy Spirit, explains Gabriel, and he will be born a holy child, nothing less than the one and only Son of God. And since Mary's relative Elizabeth has already confounded everyone's expectations by conceiving in her old age, it is suddenly quite clear to Mary that nothing is impossible with God. [36-37]

What an offer for Mary! What an opportunity for Mary. What a stressful situation. The angel is giving Mary a shot at incredible joy: the chance to be the mother of God. How big is that?! And yet, this opportunity brings with it the frightening thought that Mary will soon be visibly pregnant, carrying more weight than would come from eating a case full of Christmas cookies. Aside from the damage to her girlish figure will be the damage to her reputation - what will people say about a young woman becoming pregnant before her wedding day? According to the law, she could be stoned for becoming pregnant by anyone but Joseph, or punished in other severe and humiliating ways. It is anything but easy for Mary to agree to this offer presented by the angel Gabriel. But she says yes **[SLIDE]** *I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true.* [38] She accepts the angel's offer, takes a big bite of the opportunity put before her, and does not fall into the trap of stressing out and refusing joy.

[SLIDE] Refusing joy - what a great phrase. We're so stressed by trying to live right, eat right, think right, act right, speak right, parent right, exercise right, and look right that we've forgotten the joy of Jesus. Think of the many solid reasons that Mary could give for saying no to the angel Gabriel: not the right time, not the right place, not the right partner, not the right family system, not the right plan for the future. And yet, she says, "Here I am, bring it on." In spite of all the seemingly solid reasons to show self-control and say no, she doesn't want to be guilty of refusing joy.

How about us? Have we left the joy behind as we observe the birth of Christ? Do we feel pressured to practice massive self-denial as we face the dessert table at a holiday party? Are we sensing that there is something not right about loosening up and simply having a good time, eating some really delicious food? Have we lost the ability to happily chow down with no thought of calories, carcinogens, fat grams, E. coli or genetically modified ingredients? Over the past three decades, Americans have become ever more wary about what they eat. Now we talk about cheesecake and pork chops in hushed tones, like those once reserved for conversation about sex and drugs. Come on, now, it's Christmas. Eat. Enjoy. That January diet will come soon enough.

But true Christmas - not to speak of true Christian - joy is not about eating Christmas cookies without guilt. The joy we refuse more frequently has nothing to do with food. The happiness we so often ignore is spiritual, not physical...it involves believing, not bingeing. The joy that we are guilty of leaving behind is the joy that comes from opening our hearts to the presence of Christ, the joy that comes from letting God bless us, the joy that comes from entrusting ourselves to his

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care. Isn't that what Mary really did; she entrusted herself to God's care. And that's what saved her from the sin of leaving the joy of the Lord behind.

You see, Christmas is more than an opportunity to eat and be with family. It's also a chance to approach Jesus with a desire to be filled, and with an expectation of being filled. In a sense, we should come to Christ in the same way that children come to the dinner table. They come because they are hungry, not because they feel a social obligation. They come with anticipation, expecting something really tasty to be waiting for them. They come with trust, believing that the food will make them grow big and strong. They come without worries about calories, carcinogens, additives and food-borne illnesses. They come expecting to be filled, to be strengthened, to be satisfied, and to be nourished. We ought to approach Jesus in the very same way. Any other path could leave the joy behind.

A Lutheran named David Miller remembers kneeling in his pew after returning from communion, on a Sunday much like this one. Lost in a haze, he focused not on the Christmas holiday or the sacrament, but on his fears about what the next few days would bring. He tried to pray through his distress as the choir sang of Mary: "Hail, favored one, the Lord is with thee." But his thoughts connected only with his anxiety. Giving up his failed attempt at prayer, he listened to the choir, trying to catch his daughter's voice. Then, as the soprano descant soared above the choir, surprising tears appeared in his eyes.

These were not helpless tears of self-pity. Those he would have expected. It was not sadness that he felt, but a joy and gratitude that flowed from a mysterious world deeper and more wondrous than the one his troubled mind inhabited. David felt transported to another time and place, one where sadness and anxiety had no place. They had evaporated like so much morning mist, and a voice within him spoke to his fears. The Lord said to him, "It doesn't all depend on you. I am here."

What a gift. David came to God with a deep hunger, and he was satisfied. He came needing nourishment, and he was filled. He allowed himself to be drawn out of the world of his fears, a world that he describes as being limited by his shallow insights, minuscule skills and all-too-human weaknesses. A sense of well-being washed over him, and he knew that the voice spoke the truth. He had no doubt that this joy was a pure gift - he had done nothing to produce it, define it or control it. But it was there. "Do not fear," the Lord said to him, lovingly. "I will not fail you. Don't you know by now how much I love you?"

In the middle of our stressful lives, God wants us to experience joy. He wants us to know that he favors us, that he treasures us, and that he will not fail us. He sends Jesus to remind us that he is with us, always, in the very center of the pains and problems of human life. May we accept this gift from God, as Mary did...and as David Miller did. It's a joy that should never be refused.