Sermon for the 4th Sunday of Advent

December 24, 2023

Luke 1:46-55, 67-80

A few weeks ago, we watched the last episode of the latest season of the Great British Baking Show. I really enjoy watching it, and I admire the dedication it takes to learn all the techniques that are needed to even be *considered* as a contestant.

But what I think I like the most about it is that jealousy doesn’t have a prominent role in the show. The bakers all want to win, and I’m sure there’s loads of disappointment for those who don’t, but they seem genuinely happy when their fellow contestants succeed.

It feels countercultural these days to see people in a competition be genuinely happy for someone else.

A few days after I watched that last episode, I read an article that referred to a novel where one of the characters confesses to struggling with the commandments about coveting. His wife had died in childbirth and so had their baby. As the years passed, he found himself growing bitter toward a friend. Eventually, he realized that he coveted what his friend had: the opportunity to watch his child grow up.

It caused a subtle shift in how I understood the idea of coveting. I’d always understood it as a danger because it might lead to taking something that isn’t yours, or spending more energy in the futile pursuit of having something better than everyone else.

But after I read the article, I began to wonder if part of the reason God said we shouldn’t be the kind of people who covet our neighbor’s family or stuff is because coveting something that brings another person joy keeps *us* from sharing their joy. Keeps *us* from being genuinely happy for our neighbor when they do well.

Keeps us from loving our neighbors as we are loved by God.

Every season, the bakers on the Great British Baking Show remind us that loving our neighbors as we are loved can mean being both disappointed when we don’t get something, but also – at the same time – filled with joy for our neighbor who does.

Now, why am I getting into all of this today?

Because coveting can also keep us from allowing ourselves to be amazed.

Think about what you do when you’re amazed by something good.

I have a friend who has taken to sharing pictures of the sunrises she sees as she’s driving to work. Now, I might not be thrilled to have those texts start coming in before I want to wake up, but I *love* that she has chosen to share her amazement and wonder with ***me***. Of all the people she knows, I made the cut. So I try to make sure I respond with gratitude and appreciation.

When we are amazed by something beautiful, something *good*, something *delightful*, we want to share it with others.

And then we look for their response.

But if our hearts are hardened toward our neighbor, and they share something that brings them joy with us, will we listen? Will we share *our* joys with *them*?

There’s a lot of amazement and wonder in Luke 1 and 2. And it gets shared.

When Zechariah scribbled on a writing tablet, “His name shall be John,” and he was once again able to speak, the people were amazed as he burst into song. And they didn’t keep it to themselves. The news made its way throughout the Judean hill country.

When the angels appeared to the shepherds as they tended their flocks, the shepherds ran to Bethlehem to see the baby Jesus. And they didn’t keep it to themselves. They told others, “And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

On the 8th day, when Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple, they were amazed as Simeon took the baby in his arms and burst forth in his own song, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,…for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the gentile, and for glory to your people Israel.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

And because it’s written down, we have to assume that Mary or Joseph told someone, or that someone witnessed it all, and *they* told someone else.

People were amazed, they were filled with joy and wonder, and they interpreted all that they experienced as a sign of God’s work in the world. A sign of God’s liberation of the people.

In their joy and amazement, they shared what they witnessed: the words of Zechariah’s song, of the angels’ song.

The good news spread, and a weary world rejoiced.

**When we are unable to share the joy of our neighbor, we risk missing out on a new thing that God is doing in the world.** Which probably isn’t going to be as momentous as the birth of John, or the birth of Jesus. But is *still* God at work, bring creation to wholeness, bit by bit.

For us to find joy in a weary world, we need to make room in our hearts for the amazement and wonder that others find and share with us.

The joy and wonder and amazement of the people in Luke 1 and 2 is tied to the promise of salvation that we hear about in the songs of Zechariah and Mary. They sing in praise of what God was doing – working salvation for *all* humanity.

Throughout Scripture, salvation is about liberation from what holds people back, keeps them from flourishing. Like being enslaved or in exile.

In Mary’s song, we see that salvation is about liberation from hunger and oppression. And in Zechariah’s song, salvation is about freedom from those who would keep the people from worshipping God *so that* they **could** serve God. And it’s about forgiveness of sins.

What would our song of praise sound like today? From what does God promise to liberate us? Might it be from our temptation to covet what others have, so that we can more easily enter into their joy? So that we may find some of the rest for our weary souls that Jesus promises us?

So that we can feel more awe and wonder about what God is doing in the world, and see how that leads us to the delight of joy?

Our God became incarnate, and in doing so, showed us the path to true and lasting peace, peace in our hearts and peace for all of creation: loving our neighbors as we are loved by God, following the example of Jesus.

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, may we find in the nativity story an invitation to the peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding.

1. Luke 2:18 NRSV [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Luke 2:29-32 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)