

2023 12 17 – Joy, Joy, Your Word

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Just Like Job by Maya Angelou

<https://and-still-i-rise-poems.tumblr.com/post/77750244412/just-like-job-maya-angelou>

In her poem, *Just Like Job*, Maya Angelou begins by setting a scene of poverty, and suffering:

My God
When my blanket was nothing but dew,
Rags and bones
Were all I owned,
I chanted Your name
Just like Job.

To really understand what Dr. Angelou is describing, we need to know a little bit about the story of Job. His story is found in the Book of Job in the Hebrew Scriptures. It begins like this

Once upon a time in the land of Uz, there lived a man named Job. Job was honest and upright, revered God and turned away from evil. Three daughters and seven sons blessed the household.

Job's holding included seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred donkeys, and a huge number of household workers. Job was considered the greatest all the people of the East. (Job1:1-3)

But, according to the story, one day God was talking to Satan and began to boast about this wonderful man, Job. Satan questioned whether Job would still revere God if he wasn't so blessed. In order to prove Job's loyalty, God agreed that Satan could take away Job's possessions and even his children. Eventually, God gave Satan permission to take away Job's health.

Soon Job had nothing. All his possessions were gone. His children were killed. His body was covered in painful boils. He lived in misery. Now, there is much more to the story of Job, but this is the part that connects to the beginning of Dr. Angelou's poem.

So, in this poem, Maya Angelou is comparing her circumstances to Job's misery. I'm sure most of us have lived through times in our lives when, like Dr. Angelou, "our screams searched the heavens" for God. We have all been through painful, sorrowful, unjust times, times when it has felt like God has forgotten our name.

The fledgling church in Thessalonica was going through such a time. Previously, the apostle, Paul, had come to Thessalonica and preached the gospel in the synagogue. He had convinced some Jews, some Greeks, even a few of the leading women in the city, to join with him in creating their own community of faith, a community that would identify themselves as followers of Jesus.

But, as is described in the Book of Acts, chapter 17, "the Jews became jealous, and, recruiting some reprobates from the marketplace, formed a mob and soon had the whole city in an uproar." Some of the members of Paul's community were arrested and put in jail. Paul and his companion, Silas, had to flee for their safety.

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians was written some time later when Paul was in Corinth. The church in Thessalonica was still being persecuted, but they were persevering and they were hoping that Paul would soon return. But he was

unable to travel at that time, so Paul wrote this letter instead. Today's reading is actually from the salutation at the end of the letter. Paul had encouraged his followers to care for and support each other and then he wrote:

Rejoice always, pray constantly, and give thanks for everything—
for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Don't stifle the Spirit...

These are, of course, the words that connect this passage to today's theme and also to Maya Angelou's poem, *Just Like Job*. It's hard to imagine where rejoicing fits in either of these circumstances: in Dr. Angelou's misery or the persecution of the church in Thessalonica. But it does.

Despite her suffering, Dr. Angelou finds joy and inspiration in God's promise of compassion and love as taught by Jesus. She writes:

You said lean on Your arm
And I'm leaning
You said to trust in Your love
And I am trusting
You said to call on Your name
And I'm calling
I'm stepping out on Your word.

In this poem, which is also a prayer, Dr. Angelou is expressing her trust in the support of the Ground of our Being, and her faith in the unconditional love of the Holy Mystery. And despite the fear that she describes so vividly as "wolves in the dark," Maya Angelou is following the call of the Holy Spirit by "stepping out." Even in the midst of her pain, her fear, her suffering, she is stepping out into a world full of danger, a world full of possibility. She will not allow her circumstance to stifle the Spirit, the Essence of Love.

In the midst of all of the misery, the fear, the trust, the inspiration, she is experiencing joy:

Joy, joy
Your word
Joy, joy
The wonderful word of the Son of God.

Even in the midst of anguish, Maya Angelou is able to experience joy and somehow that joy is connected to her faith, trust, and call. So how is that possible?

First let's talk about joy. What is joy? In order to answer this question I went to an obvious source. It's called, *The Book of Joy*, and it is based on a conversation that took place between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu back in April, 2015. In it they quote a Buddhist scholar called Matthieu Riccard who identified several levels of joy including the three most exalted states, namely:

- rejoicing in someone's happiness;
- delight or enchantment (a shining kind of contentment);
- spiritual radiance (a serene joy born from deep well-being and benevolence). (Book of Joy, page 34)

I can see how the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu fit those descriptions. But most of us can only aspire to these three most exalted levels of joy. So let's just say that joy, however fleeting, is something deeper, a step beyond happiness.

In today's scripture reading, the apostle, Paul, identified two possible ways to find joy: pray constantly, and give thanks for everything.

As I mentioned last week, praying, in whatever form works for you, is definitely a path to serenity, to contentment, to peace. When we pray we give our troubles to God, we let go of whatever is holding us down. We free ourselves for stepping out into the world, for answering God's call. We allow ourselves to experience the many opportunities for joy in our world.

Prayer is also an opportunity for giving thanks. Many scholars have made the deep connection between practices of gratitude and living a joy-filled life. In fact, one of the ideas that came from our Advent study guide this week was to spend time each day writing down ten things for which you are grateful, ten things, large or small, that give you joy. If we do this every day and keep a running list with no repeats, it's amazing how much joy just creating that list can bring us!

Finally, like Paul, both the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu expressed at different times the importance of compassion, caring for each other, for those we know and love and even for the stranger. Compassion, the turning of ones thoughts to others and away from our own troubles can also lead to joy. (*The Book of Joy*, pages 251-262)

In fact, at our Advent Study this week, we wondered if Dr. Angelou was doing just that when she ended her poem with the words,

Past rumor mongers
And midnight ramblers
Past the liars and the cheaters and the gamblers
On Your word,
On Your word,
On the wonderful word of the Son of God
I'm stepping out on Your word.

Was she expressing her courage at stepping out into the dangers of the world, or was she demonstrating compassion, recognizing the sacred in even the liars, the cheaters and the gamblers? Was she deliberately seeking out those that needed her help? And was that compassion, that caring, part of the joy that she found in the unconditional love and mercy that is the word of the Holy Mystery, the Ground of Our Being.

May we all find the ability to “rejoice always, pray constantly, [and] give thanks for everything.” May we all allow the loving, compassionate Spirit of God to flow through us, so that we too can step out into the world with faith, courage and joy. May it be so. Amen.