

**THE OLD MEETING HOUSE
EAST MONTPELIER CENTER, VT**

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“Rejoice!”

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So the story I'm going to tell you is a little bit dark. I know this seems an odd place to start for a sermon on rejoicing in advent . But trust me, it is not. But it is however, a little too dark for kids. So I'm going to be a little vague. And ask you to read between the lines. Just pretend you're at a Disney movie, and all the terrible things that happen to the parents are happening. Indeed, like a Disney story, it may sound familiar.

Her story begins when she was a teenager. A teenager in a culture where marriage and being pure was all that mattered for a woman. She was neither. Through no action of her own, she watched with horror as each day she grew more and more pregnant. She was a shame to all of her family. She had been forced out of her home, forced to travel for endless, dusty days, all she wanted was sleep. But for her there was only a straw mat, she was housed like an animal. At night, she was kept awake by the nightmare that her first son would be taken from her, killed.

As bad as the night was, the day was worse. Because that's when the soldiers visited. See, as much as this resembles the gospel stories of Mary that we know, this story is the story of a woman I'll call Marian. She is Korean, and she was kidnapped from her family when she was 15, during WWII. She was in her 80s when she told me her story, living in a home with other survivors.

Marian's story was all of their stories. As was her daily routine, she had gone out to the local river to fetch water. It was still very, very early in the morning. The sun had not yet fully risen, the dew was still heavy on the trees. Her country was occupied, and there were foreign soldiers everywhere. And yet this was still her favorite time of day – that early time between night and day between dark and light, and so she picks up her pails and heads back home – one heavy pail in each arm. And when the sun finally did rise, as she tells it, all that was left there by that river were the pails - lying abandoned and empty on the ground, their contents spilled out, absorbed by the ground.

They had all been kidnapped to be "comfort women" – female slaves for Japanese soldiers. Each one was given a small straw mat in a curtained off room, where dozens of soldiers would visit them each day. Marian had prayed only to be spared pregnancy or disease – because both of those meant death. And she was pregnant. Two agonizing weeks after she found out, her camp was liberated. She was spared.

I tell you Marian's story now because in so many ways it is our Christmas story, and I think in our celebrations, it is all too easy to forget that Jesus didn't come in the middle of a fairy tale, at least not for Mary. Jesus came in a horror story.

All the stuff about Mary being a virgin? All those things you hear on tv? Throw it out the window. Virgin could easily mean "young woman." In Greek literature, many important gods were traditionally said to be born to virginal young women. It is likely that this part of our Christmas story was added by the evangelists later, so that Greco-Roman audiences would understand Jesus' importance. Likewise, the star was seen to be a major portent of important figures. Truth, in the Greek sense, doesn't have anything to do with fact, but rather with meaning. As Eli Weisel said, "some stories are true that never happened."

In fact, Mary was a young teenage girl, unmarried. Recent scholarship suggests that it would have been likely that Jesus' biological father was a Roman Soldier. This would explain why Joseph would be angry, but would not necessarily disown her. I almost like this version of the story better. You know why? Because next week we will dress up our children and watch them celebrate what is, indeed, the biggest miracle of them all – new life. We will sing our carols, we will stand amid the midst of mud and muck and rejoice. And we should rejoice. But we should rejoice, not because it is a happy story, but precisely the opposite. Because it is a story of how life – God- can take even the most horrible things and make them the very stuff of a new heaven and a new earth.

Jesus came in a horror story. This was no accident. Most major religions have celebrations now, near the equinox, the longest night, because there is truth in this darkness. It is in the darkness, with those that despair, that the divine chooses to come. We find God, God finds us, when we most need God. So it was for Mary.

And so it was for Marian, the shamanist octogenarian who introduced me to Christmas. If you can imagine it, as she told me her story, her face was all laugh lines and smiles. Perhaps because we are so early in our time together, I feel the need to share with you these foundational stories that have shaped my understanding of Christian scripture. See, I don't think I understood Christmas until I met her. The overwhelming resemblance to Mary's story is striking, of course. But so is her response. See, I think God entered into the world through Marian, like through Mary.

Picture her. She is this high, hunched over, a grandmother. A month after I met her, Marian's protests led the Japanese government to admit that "comfort stations" existed. Maybe this doesn't mean much to you or me, but Marian challenged national consciousness, and national attitudes towards women – and she won. Marian has changed history.

There is a scripture passage assigned to today that I did not read. It is from the gospel of John, and it talks about John the Baptist – the wild man in the desert who ate honey and locusts and was there to “prepare the way of the Lord.” It was John who baptized Jesus. The passage reads, in beautiful metaphor, “he came to testify to the light, but he was not the light.”

I had no intention of addressing this passage today, until yesterday, when I attended the ordination of a very good friend and colleague of mine. The preacher, the bishop of the Boston association of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, looked at those being ordained and said, “remember that – you are here to testify to the light, but you are NOT the light! Your job is to bring the light to people, but you are NOT the light!”

Now, I understand what he is saying. The writer of the gospel of John was distinguishing the Baptist from Jesus – as a way of saying that it is Jesus we must follow, the light that must guide us. And this is true. I have written about this very concept – that ministry is like the sun and the moon. We are the moon, brilliant, reflecting the light of the sun.

Yet I found myself wanting to stand up to those ordinands and tell them about Marian. To tell them about Mary. To challenge the Bishop to look at Marian and say she is not the light. To read to him the magnificat – the song of Mary – who dared to look at her oppression and say “my soul rejoices in my God”. Put those words on your lips and tell me she was not the light. John may have testified to the light, but that was because he *knew* it. It was in him.

Isaiah cries out to his people, conflicted, torn, “I have been sent to proclaim release to the captives, healing for the sick, freedom for the oppressed!” Mary looked at her growing belly, the sign of her shame – her people’s shame, really – and cried out “my soul rejoices!” Marian looked at her torture – her people’s torture – and cried out justice for all her people.

But more than that, as an 80 year old woman, she became a sculptor. There is one more thing about Marian: as an octogenarian, she bends steel to her will, forms it into beautiful representations of mother earth cradling the brokenness of humanity, arms and breasts outstretched to feed us and heal us and hold us. For Marian, as many times as humanity screws up, her story told her that the divine is always there to forgive, to sustain, to redeem. That her role is to forgive, to sustain, to redeem. Imagine the light that must radiate from such a woman. To meet her is life-changing. I wish you could see her light.

But I am also here to tell you that it’s okay if you don’t see it. Mary and Marian are here to tell us that it’s okay if you don’t see it. In this room, today, there are those of us who are suffering from extreme depression. There are those suffering from losses of spouses, of family, of friends. There are those for whom the holidays are darker than this room. There are those for whom I say “Good morning” and the response is, “is it?” And that is more than okay – that is the foundation of the Christmas story. That darkness is where God was born – Jesus knows it well.

So in these next few moments of silence, let us sit with that darkness. Let us wash ourselves in the knowledge that it is an integral part of our lives. Let us wash ourselves in the knowledge that no matter what we are feeling, we are not beyond God – we are, in fact, exactly the people that God visits, we are the people in whom God chooses – wants – to be born.

Indeed, this – THIS – is the purpose of Advent. We confront the growing darkness. We look out into the world of fear, poverty, depression, famine. We acknowledge it. We do not drown it in gifts and wrapping paper, and endless renditions of “Santa Baby.” We look at it. And then we look at all the times before us when God’s light has been birthed into the world, one light at a time. Isaiah and Mary, and John.

And then we bend steel to our will.

Because this is the promise of Christmas: Isaiah, Mary, John, Jesus, Marian. Regimes end. Slaves are freed. Steel bends. Love wins. Love wins.

This is the promise of Christmas: true joy. The joy that comes not from hiding from darkness, but the day when every single child, every single person is willing to face the darkness, when every single voice looks at the darkness and chooses to say instead, “rejoice, for I, too, want to walk in the light. I, too, want to *be* the light.” When we choose to say “rejoice” – when we choose to reflect not the darkness, but God’s light. When, like all those before us – we become God’s light.

And so, Bishop, I must disagree, the very miracle of Christmas is just precisely this: *you*. You ARE the light. Because together we say: REJOICE!