

## **Rejoice! God Is Near**

**Third Sunday of Advent (Gaudete Sunday) *Isaiah 35:1–10* | *Luke 1:45–55* |  
*James 5:7–10***

**December 14, 2025**

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Joyfulness is a state of mind that can truly be experienced only by those who feel it. It is not a commodity that can be bought or sold; rather, it is an internal experience that often requires external circumstances to bring it to expression. There are specific causes that give rise to joy in individuals, communities, and even nations. Today's Scripture highlights the joy God bestowed upon Mary, the God-bearer, and through her, upon the entire world. The redemptive reversals proclaimed in Luke's Gospel represent a joy that overturns worldly expectations. Jesus' coming introduces a subversive joy that reshapes political, social, and economic realities. The Magnificat is not merely a reflection of Mary's personal happiness in response to Elizabeth's blessing; it is a shared hope for humanity—especially for those seeking liberation from societal, historical, political, and economic oppression—now humbled and brought low.

Mary traveled to visit her relative Elizabeth in a Judean hill town, approximately eighty miles from Nazareth in Galilee. Upon entering Zechariah's house, she greeted Elizabeth. This moment is often understood as one of intrauterine

recognition, sparking a spiritual response in the unborn John, who leapt in his mother's womb. It may be understood as John's first prophetic act, making Elizabeth herself a prophet. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth responded with a prophetic blessing, declaring Mary blessed among women and praising the fruit of her womb. This was an extraordinary proclamation, for Mary was to become the mother of Elizabeth's Lord and the bearer of the beloved Son of God.

This visitation, centered on the nearness of joy, culminates in Mary's song, recorded by Luke as her response to Elizabeth's blessing—the Magnificat. The song connects the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, underscoring the anticipation of the Messiah's arrival and the promise of joy for the world. On this third Sunday of Advent, we are compelled to ask: What kind of joy do we expect from God, and how is such joy possible?

In today's Scripture reading, we hear the good news of a joy that is radical, revolutionary, and subversive. It is subversive because Mary sings the Magnificat—an extraordinary act in her time. A young, unwed, pregnant woman, thoroughly marginalized by her culture, gives prophetic voice to generations through her song. She speaks for the voiceless and proclaims that God is near to the lowly. Mary herself appears astonished by what God has done, as her song stretches beyond realistic expectations and ignites the imagination of its hearers.

What Mary receives from God, she extends to all generations who live under the yoke of suffering and oppression. The Magnificat presents Mary's present joy and overflowing praise as a response to what God has done—both personally, in granting her the honor of being remembered by all generations, and universally, through God's encompassing work of salvation. She proclaims that all who live under similar sociopolitical and cultural realities will rejoice in God, for God has looked with favor upon the lowliness of his servant. The joy Mary shares across generations carries far-reaching implications within the upside-down world God inaugurates. God scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, brings down the powerful from their thrones, lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry with good things, and sends the rich away empty. This topsy-turvy future has already begun in God's choice of Mary as the bearer of the Messiah. Mary's song anticipates the dismantling of social structures that measure her worth solely by her ability to bear a son.

Rejoice! Christmas signifies a season of profound reversals—of status, power, prestige, and position. Therefore, rejoice! God is near—not distant, not indifferent, not slow to care or reluctant to save. God is near, coming to restore, redeem, and bring joy where sorrow once reigned. Mary rejoices not because her life is easy, but because God has entered her life with redeeming power. She rejoices before the promise is fulfilled, just as Isaiah calls the people to rejoice before the desert has

fully bloomed. This is Advent joy—joy rooted not in circumstance, but in God’s nearness.

God’s nearness is not a vague spiritual idea; it is transformative. When God is near, deserts bloom. Dry places flourish again. When God is near, fear gives way to courage, hands are strengthened, and knees cease trembling. When God is near, the lowly are lifted up.

Just as Mary—a humble servant girl—becomes the chosen bearer of salvation, so too, when God is near, the oppressed find freedom. Isaiah calls them “the ransomed of the Lord.” When God is near, joy erupts in unexpected places—even in the wilderness, even in a womb, even in a weary heart. This is why we proclaim, “Rejoice!”—not because everything is perfect, but because everything is being redeemed.

God is near to us today. And so, beloved, what does this mean for us? It means our wilderness is not wasted. God can bring life to the barren places we navigate—whether they are marked by grief, loneliness, financial strain, broken relationships, or weary spirits. It means we can rejoice even while we wait. Like Mary, we can praise God before the miracle is complete. As James exhorts us, we can strengthen our hearts as we await God’s timing. Like Isaiah, we can trust that the desert will bloom—even when all we see is sand. God is closer than our fear, closer than our

sorrow, closer than our struggle. Even when we do not feel God's nearness, today's Scriptures insist it is real.

Joy, then, is not optional—it is essential. Joy is a witness. Joy is resistance. Joy is an act of faith that declares, “I know God is coming. I know God is already at work. I know deliverance is on the way.”

Therefore, rejoice! Beloved in Christ, hear the message of Advent clearly: Rejoice! God is near—near our struggles, near our hopes, near our world. Near in Christ—Emmanuel, God with us. Let us rejoice like Isaiah, because God's promises are sure. Let us rejoice like Mary, because God's mercy is alive and moving. Let us rejoice like James, because the Lord's coming is near. May our hearts rise in joy—not because life is easy, but because God is present, God is faithful, and God is drawing near even now.

**Amen.**