

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
Sunday, Dec. 10, 2023
Message: “We’re Going to Japan”
Rev. Irene Willis Hassan

Scripture: Luke 1:26-55

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”^[b] 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” 34 Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”^[c] 35 The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born^[d] will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God.”³⁸ Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be^[e] a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

46 And Mary^[a] said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.
Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name;
50 indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.
54 He has come to the aid of his child Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Sermon: We're Going to Japan

If you are reading the sermon title and are a bit confused, don't worry, this isn't a new bizarre plan that I've come up with for the church. We're not literally going to Japan, although I would totally welcome that trip if you wanted to do that together someday! I use a lot of metaphors in my sermons, so bear with me as we visit metaphorical Japan here today instead of the actual one.

In the scripture reading for today, we have another peculiarity in biblical character reactions. These verses are called “Mary's Song,” in which the angel Gabriel has just told her that she's going to become miraculously pregnant before her marriage. She responds by rejoicing in her good fortune and praising God.

It's a peculiar reaction because I don't think this is how most of us would react in this situation. If you're preparing for your wedding, the last thing you'd want to hear is that you've become mysteriously pregnant without the assistance of your future husband. Wedding planning is hard enough without that nonsense throwing a wrench in the works.

Very often, the cliché that “man makes plans and God laughs” rings true. The founders of this church likely built it imagining that the church would be a haven of joyful discipleship for generations to come. Unfortunately, they didn't realize that their grandchildren would basically scrap the whole social system of church and similar institutions, and all those churches and social institutions would fall into danger of elimination before this church even reached its 75th anniversary. Like Mary, our charter members made plans in which God decided to toss a major curveball.

I imagine Mary's initial reactions were fear and sadness about the loss of her intended plans. Scripture says Mary was perplexed by Gabriel's news. She probably knew that Joseph would not be pleased, nor would her family or community. Who's going to possibly believe that God made her pregnant? This news could very well have put her life and wellbeing at risk.

Like Mary, we may also feel perplexed as our intended plans for this church seem to be morphing into something else. But the fact is that God is not doing the same thing with this church that He did in 1993, and there's nothing we can do to change His will. God evolving His plans isn't a new thing. The way the Church universal functioned in 1993 isn't the same as how it functioned in 1563, and the Church of 1563 didn't function in the same way as the Church of 153. Likewise, in Mary's time, God had never before placed His Son in a human woman to walk among the peoples of the earth. Although God doesn't change, His plans for us certainly do, and he doesn't take our opinions about the changes He makes when He decides to make them.

Even without asking for our input on the new directions He chooses for us, God expects us to meet His plans for us with joy and thanksgiving. This is easier said than done and Mary is a much braver soul than much of the rest of us. How can we be like Mary and react with joy to potentially unsettling news about the changes He makes in His plans for us?

When I was a child, I had a friend named Ruth who had Down Syndrome. I remember my mother asking her mother once how she felt when the doctors informed her that her child was going to have this condition. Ruth's mom smiled and said, "When you take a trip to France, you plan out all the things you want to see and do and eat in France. You get excited about going to France and start looking at maps and guidebooks. Being told your child has Down Syndrome when you're pregnant is like boarding the flight to France, only to be told that the flight is actually going to Japan. Japan isn't worse than France, you just have to get new guidebooks and learn about your new destination. And I've found that I've quite enjoyed my trip to Japan so far."

That response stuck with me through the years. Whenever I find myself facing a potentially disheartening change of plans, I imagine myself boarding a plane to a different destination than where I intended to go. I start imagining all the exciting things I'll see at this new destination. Like Ruth's mom, I rejoice in the opportunity to see Japan. The overall goal to take a trip hasn't changed. Likewise, God hasn't ever changed His goal of bringing humankind closer to Him; He's just sometimes changed the methodology of how He does it.

As we pray over the major changes needed in the church to appeal to a new generation, or the things in our everyday lives that are going unexpectedly, let us keep Ruth's mom's words in mind. Let us keep Mary's song of joy over unforeseen change in mind. Friends, rejoice that we're going to Japan. I don't really know what Japan looks like, but I know we can ask other people who have visited Japan before what we should know about it. I know we can read guidebooks about Japan. We can dream about the things in Japan that we're curious to see. I know that we will probably get a little lost sometimes while in Japan, regardless of how meticulously we plan the trip.

Our metaphorical Japan doesn't have to look like what I've proposed to you all so far about the church, but it does have to look different than the metaphorical trip to France that we originally intended. We're at the airport and God's told us that the flight changed from France to Japan. If we arrive in Japan and have only read guidebooks to France, then we're going to have a disappointing trip.

Mary taught us a valuable lesson on rejoicing in changing plans. Mary didn't run away from the change, she didn't try to stop it; she rejoiced. And because Mary embraced her metaphorical trip to Japan, the world has been redeemed by the arrival of her Son, Jesus.

View the places of unexpected change in your life and in the church and as opportunity rather than hindrance. Say yes to the pleasant surprises of transformation that is possible when we open ourselves to the new directions in which God calls us.

Amen.