

# The Preferential Option for the Positive

December 14, 2025

Advent has a way of sneaking up on us.

We move through the season lighting candles — Hope, Peace, Joy — but the world around us doesn't slow down to match the liturgical calendar. The news keeps breaking. Bodies keep aching. Relationships keep straining. And so when we arrive at the pink candle, the candle of Joy, it often feels... a little awkward.

Joy can feel like a hard sell.

Which is why I want to begin this morning not with a command to “be joyful,” but with a story — one that holds joy honestly, without rushing past pain.

A colleague of mine, Darrell Goodwin, tells the story of receiving a phone call that shattered his sense of stability. His grandmother — a deeply formative presence in his life — had been rushed to the hospital. A pinched nerve had become so severe she could no longer walk. She ended up needing emergency surgery, there were complications, a second surgery was needed. She ended up spending weeks in the hospital.

Darrell was living thousands of miles away. He scrambled to get time off, book flights, and prayed desperate prayers at 30,000 feet. At that point his prayers were not prayers for joy, but rather for relief, for deliverance, for presence. The kind of prayers you pray when you are afraid.

Over time, it became clear that nothing would go back to the way it had been before.

His grandmother would not return to independent living. And just as clearly, Darrell realized something else: she would need to come live with him. He writes that he's not sure anything short of that crisis would have opened his heart to the reality that he was being invited — maybe even called — to become her caregiver.

Eight years later, he wakes up each morning knowing her final days are filled with love, dignity, care, and presence.

“What felt like affliction,” he writes, “quietly birthed joy.”

God often works in the hidden spaces between what is breaking and what is becoming.

That story matters on this Sunday of Joy, because it tells the truth: joy is not the absence of pain. It is not optimism. It is not denial. It is not pretending things are better than they are.

Joy is something that gets born. Which brings us to Advent.

Advent is not a season of sentimentality. It is a season of pregnancy. Of labor. Of waiting. Of bodies that are changed by what they are carrying. And Advent joy is not about plastering a

smile over a weary world — it's about putting ourselves into the service of what God is trying to birth.

That's where I want to offer the phrase that gives this sermon its title: the preferential option for the positive. It's a riff on a phrase from liberation theology: the preferential option for the poor. The preferential option for the poor claims that one of the dominant themes that runs through scripture — not as an abstract idea, but as a lived commitment — is that God is on the side of those who are oppressed, exploited, and pushed to the margins. That God's concern tilts toward liberation.

My contention is that Advent adds a preferential option for the positive to the preferential option for the poor. Not toxic positivity — not cheerfulness, not good vibes only — but the things that move life forward. Hope instead of despair. Peace instead of domination. Joy instead of resignation. Love instead of fear.

Advent insists that these things are not naive. They are necessary. They are the very things God chooses to bring into the world — through human bodies, human courage, human consent.

Which brings us to Mary.

Mary's song — the Magnificat — is one of the most joyful texts in scripture, and also one of the most dangerous. It has been banned, censored, and silenced throughout history precisely because it refuses to separate joy from justice.

"My soul magnifies the Lord," Mary sings, "and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..."

But notice what she rejoices about.

God has scattered the proud.  
God has brought down the powerful.  
God has lifted up the lowly.  
God has filled the hungry with good things.

This is not quiet joy. This is not polite joy. This is not joy that keeps the peace. This is joy that knows something is shifting. And it begins, crucially, with Mary's consent. With her yes.

You see, Mary is not coerced. She is not swept along by fate. She asks questions. She ponders. And then she agrees to participate in what God is doing — even though it will upend her life.

Joy, in this story, is not something that happens to Mary. It is something she chooses to carry.

And then there is Joseph.

Joseph, who always gets less airtime, but whose quiet courage deserves our attention. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that Joseph is a righteous man. Which means he knows the law. He

knows the rules. He knows what he is entitled to do when his fiancé turns up pregnant. The law gives him options — none of them particularly compassionate.

But Joseph is also a man who listens.

He listens to his fear, but he also listens to his conscience. AND he listens to a dream — a divine message that invites him away from a strict, cold-hearted application of the law and toward mercy.

Joseph's joy doesn't look like celebration. It looks like restraint. It looks like choosing relationship over reputation. It looks like trusting that love is more life-giving than control.

Mary consents. Joseph chooses compassion.

And between their choices, something new is born. This is where Advent joy becomes deeply practical. Because joy, in this sense, is not a mood. It is a posture. A decision to side with what gives life — even when other options are available. Even when fear would be easier. Even when the empire insists nothing will ever really change.

Which is why I'm so taken right now by the reflections of another colleague of mine, Derek Penwell. He names the reality many of us are carrying: economic precarity, political violence, families torn apart, communities living in fear. And he asks the honest question — and we're supposed to preach joy?

Yes. But not cheaply.

The joy of Advent, he writes, "isn't denial. It isn't pretending things are better than they are, but the defiant insistence that the small, stubborn signs of God's arriving reign are truer than what looks like the empire's permanence."

That sentence matters.

Because empire always wants to convince us that despair is realistic and hope is childish. That cruelty is inevitable and compassion is weak. That the way things are is the way they will always be. Advent joy refuses that lie. It says: look again.

Look at a young woman singing liberation into being.  
Look at a man choosing mercy over law.  
Look at caregivers discovering a deeper calling through affliction.  
Look at communities who keep feeding, sheltering, welcoming, resisting.

These are not distractions from reality. They are revelations of it.

So, what does it mean, for us, to practice a preferential option for the positive?

It means we train our attention — not away from suffering, but toward what is being born within it. We ask Darrell Goodwin's question: What divine fruit might only come after this? What is this moment shaping in us that could not have emerged otherwise?

It means we refuse to confuse cynicism with wisdom. It means we choose, again and again, to consent — as Mary did — to carrying hope, even when it costs us something.

It means we choose, as Joseph did, to follow the dream of love rather than the letter of the law when the law has lost its soul. It means we light this pink candle not because everything is fine, but because something is happening.

Advent joy is the joy of midwives. Of people who know that birth is messy, painful, risky — and still worth it.

And here's the good news: you don't have to manufacture that joy. You don't have to feel it all the time. You don't have to pretend. You only have to make space for what God is trying to birth in you and among us.

Because what is at the absolute core of what Christmas is, is that God is still choosing to enter the world this way — through ordinary people, fragile bodies, courageous yeses, compassionate decisions.

Joy is not the denial of the darkness. It is the light that insists the darkness is not the final word.

So may we, in this Advent season, commit to the preferential option for the positive — to hope, peace, joy, and love — not because they are easy, but because they are holy. And may we trust that what we carry now, however tender or uncertain, is part of God's ongoing work of bringing new life into the world.

May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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**Luke 1:46b–55; Matthew 1:18–25**  
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