

Elizabeth's Story: *The Need for Joy*

Luke 1:5-15, 23-25, 39-45; John 15:11; 16:19-22

“Joy to the world. The Lord has come.” This 3rd Sunday of Advent, I want us to ask whether Jesus really brings joy to the world – and joy into our lives. After all, it has been 6 years since 20-year-old Adam Lanza fatally shot 20 children between six and seven years old, as well as six adult staff members at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT. I’ve been preparing this sermon envisioning me delivering a message of joy to the parents of those children at their anniversary remembrance.

Our Bible passages today speak a lot about joy – and I imagine it’s already clear to you that they speak of joy in a way very different from the way we speak of joy in our world. We often think of joy as being a synonym for happiness. We become happy when something good happens to us – and we often call that joy. And, there is a relationship between happiness and joy! But, while happiness comes and goes with changing circumstances, Jesus says he gives a joy does not. That is not to say that our joy is independent of circumstances. It isn’t. Terrible things that happen to us attack our joy; wonderful things that happen to us fuel our joy. So, I’ve begun to **define the joy that Jesus came to bring an inner contentment mingled with delight that cannot be eradicated by circumstances in this world.** In other words, difficult/painful circumstances certainly attack our joy but, according to the New Testament, they cannot take it away when our faith is in Jesus. In fact, joy both sustains us in the midst of trouble as well as enlivens us when we have good experiences or receive good things. Joy is an amazing reality that I pray you will experience every day of your life.

Elizabeth: The Faithful Woman Who Found Joy in Her Lord

I believe Elizabeth’s story, reported by Luke in Luke 1, will help us see how the joy that comes through meeting Jesus coexists and interacts with the trouble that is a part of life this side of heaven. Luke begins his gospel in 1:1-4 by telling us how careful he was to get the story right. He tells us he has done research into what happened when Jesus came -- interviewing those who were eyewitnesses. In other words, Luke says that the people in his account are real people and his news about them is real news, news to be trusted.

And, he starts by telling us of two little-known people, Zechariah and Elizabeth. They lived in out in the hills, far away from the city. They were not people of renown. But, real people – people like you and me.

Right in the beginning, **Luke tells us these two people were 1) righteous in the sight of God, 2) keepers of God’s commands, and 3) blameless.** This was

especially important for Luke's report about Elizabeth because Luke would say in v. 7 that Elizabeth was not able to conceive. Luke wrote about her faithfulness because many people in that small town in the hills would have considered it a curse from God when a woman couldn't have a child. Well, that was most certainly not the case with Elizabeth.

So, for the sake of being concise, let me put two things in Luke's story in juxtaposition to one another so that you might be able to empathize with her situation. **Elizabeth:**

1. Was righteous, obedient to God's laws, and blameless (1:6).
2. Had nonetheless lived in disgrace (1:25).

And, Luke said, Elizabeth was "very old (1:7)". I imagine many of you know the story. The priests annually cast lots to see which of them would go into the Temple to burn incense. It was viewed as a great, once-in-a-lifetime, honor. In this case, the lot fell to Zacharias. Luke tells his story to let us know that, although the decision was made by the casting of lots, this was really a divine appointment. God is not a God of chance. God is behind what seem to be coincidences. A chance meeting with someone you haven't seen in church in a while is probably not a coincidence. It may be God giving you an opportunity to encourage that person and let them know they have been missed. There are no coincidences in the kingdom of God.

Gabriel meets the old priest while he is the temple and tells him that he and Elizabeth will have a son. But, Zechariah doesn't believe it! Would you have? My grandmother was 51 years old when she gave birth to my Mom – and people could hardly believe it. And, Elizabeth was much older than my grandmother was. So, Zechariah was struck dumb because of his disbelief.

But, Elizabeth believes. She says, "*The Lord has done this for me. In these days, he has shown me his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people* (1:25)."

After becoming pregnant, Elizabeth remained in seclusion for a five-month period. No one knows why for sure. But, let's think about this life of feeling disgraced that she speaks about. Would she have felt envy toward those blessed with children, especially the ones who seemed less devoted to God than she? Was she tempted to resent God for what he had done, or, in her case, failed to do? Had she ever wondered whether Zechariah would take another wife or even divorce her because she could not have a child? After all, she knew the story of Hannah that we learned about last week. Elizabeth's husband could have done what Hannah's did, i.e., Zechariah could have taken a different wife to solve their problem.

What we do know is that Elizabeth remained faithful to God in spite of her shame. I think she probably pulls away from others in this sacred time with a sense of privacy about the precious and intimate way that God has dealt with her in her old age. She wants to make sure her heart is right with the God who has done something quite wonderful. For her, there would be no “Pinterest-like gender-reveal” until God’s time had come.

It was soon after the 6th month of her pregnancy that Elizabeth’s young unmarried relative Mary came unexpectedly and with little warning to Elizabeth’s home out in the hills to find refuge from her shame of being pregnant outside marriage. The report of the meeting of these two women in 1:39-45 is remarkable. I’ve tried to put into my own words what I imagine Elizabeth telling Luke as he asked her about that visit:

What a commotion I felt! It was like my baby was fluttering or flying inside me. It wasn’t like the violent kicks I had been having. I somehow knew my child was rejoicing. Then, something happened that I had never felt before: The Lord somehow worked within me. I’d read about such things in Scripture but had never experienced it. I now know that I was filled with the Holy Spirit. I had to speak in a very loud voice as I turned to Mary and said, ‘Blessed are you among all women, Mary, and blessed is the child you will bear. How blessed I am that the Lord of my Lord should come to me.’ That’s what I called Mary – the mother of my Lord!”

“And I told Mary, ‘As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy!’ We looked at each other in astonishment. It was really a meeting of four – our two babies and we two women. And, because of that child within her, both of us were filled with joy as we never had been before!”

As I think about Elizabeth, I envision her as a woman who had lived a life of faithful commitment and obedience to the Lord all her life in spite of her longing for a child – the child she thought would fill the emptiness inside her. Well, the miraculous pregnancy in her old age certainly brought her a sense of wonder and a renewed commitment to Jehovah. But, it was this child inside Mary that changed everything! It was something about this child, whom she described as “my Lord”, who somehow completed her joy.

And, that brings us to Jesus and his own words about being the joy-giver.

Jesus: The One Who Came to Bring Joy -- *I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete* (Jn 15:11).

We are in week 3 in our series, *Why Do We Need the Manger?* We have joined Christians all over the world in considering how it is that Jesus actually meets our deepest human needs. In week 1, we looked at Eve and her need for hope and then

heard some of Jesus's last words as he said, *"I am going to prepare a place for you. I am the way to the Father (Jn 14:6)."* In week 2, Pastor Jeff turned our attention to Hannah and her need for peace – and then to Jesus in his farewell discourse saying, *"Peace, I leave with you. My peace, I give to you (Jn 15:27)."* This week, we see Elizabeth and her need for joy. And, again, in some of Jesus's last words, we hear, *"I have come that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full (Jn 15:11)."*

But, even as he spoke those words, his own joy was being assaulted. He would soon be experiencing sweat drops like blood knowing he would have to bear the sins of the world upon himself. And, he knew his disciples would soon be facing their most difficult trials as they would see him being arrested and sentenced to death. And, **Jesus knows that you and I also struggle with the need for joy in our lives as we live this side of heaven.** His words in Jn 15:11 suggest that there is a joy he gives his followers now – but is not yet complete. *"My joy I give to you now"*. Then, he implies that someday, *"my joy in you will be complete."*

So, **how does this function in our daily lives – this joy that is present through faith in him now but is not yet complete?** I have read through these final words of Jesus countless times as I've gone through the most difficult times of my life. Let me show you **four words I hold onto** in those times that come from Jesus's teaching: promise, perspective, presence, and people.

Jesus on Joy in This Trouble-Filled World

Promise – *I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy (16:22b).*

Elizabeth lived in the midst of her disgrace in light of the promise that a Messiah would be born who would be *"God with us"* from Is 7:14. We live in light of Jesus's promise that he will return to complete what he started. We are to live now in light of his promise to make all things right in our lives – to take away all pain, tears, and death. In light of that, you and I must ask again and again, *"Do I trust Jesus? Can I wait with joy in light of his promise? Do you? As for me, I have decided to believe him – and I pray you will too."*

Perspective -- *You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy (16:20a).*

You see, the promises that Jesus gives us should lead to us having a different perspective on the tough times that happen in our world. Basically, we're not surprised by them. We know that we and everything in this world are still in process and that the completing of this process is sure because Jesus has said so! I remember how **Dean Tite Tienou would say** again and again to me, when difficulties came, *"Why are you surprised Greg. This is the way we are! This is*

the way our world now is. But, it will not always be this way – so let's be faithful and trust God." He was right. Just like Elizabeth did in her sorrow, let's be faithful and trust God.

Biblical joy looks forward in the midst of trouble in hope -- anticipating that God ultimately will remove all affliction and tribulation. The Apostle Paul told people who were grieving over the death of loved ones, "*We do not grieve like those who have no hope* (1 Thes 4:13). Oh, we do feel grief! But, our grief is changed by the perspective that our grief is temporary – for the Lord Jesus we follow has defeated death and promise eternal life. Hallelujah!

Presence -- *I will not leave you as orphans* (14:18). *I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth* (14:16-17).

It must have shocked the disciples when Jesus said that it was good for them that he would leave the world. That must have been hard to believe. But, the reason was that Jesus had to leave so that the Holy Spirit could come – come and be with us; come and live in us. And, as the Bible says in Gal 5:22, one part of the fruit of the Spirit is joy. **One of the things that has given joy to Christians all over the world throughout history is an inner experience of the presence of God through his Spirit.** This point alone is worthy of an entire sermon. But, today, let me simply tell you that if you want to read more, read through Romans 8:17-38.

I will simply say this now, "This very real presence of the Holy Spirit has been the key to my experience of joy in tough times. It's like what the disciples experienced in tough times in Acts 13:52, "*Their hearts were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.*"

People -- *Where I am going, you cannot now come... So, a new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another* (13:33-34).

Jesus knows us – so he also knows that, even though God's presence in our lives through his Spirit is very real, sometimes we need the support that comes tangibly through his people. We need one another. Sometimes, I need you. Sometimes you need me. But, always – we need one another. God uses his people to bring joy into his children's lives.

I knew that today, in speaking about experiencing joy in the midst of trouble, there would be people in church going through deep trouble right now. Maybe you're one of those. So, I've imagined people asking, "Is this real or is all this just the platitudes of a preacher?" So, what I've done all week is to ask people in our

church family whether this is real to them. I've gotten many responses. I'll share two of them:

One of my struggles in life is being separated from my family and country of origin at age of 19. It has had a profound impact on the stability and love that I experienced during the first two decades of my life. The holidays are especially difficult since I can't be with my parents and extended family. I used to overcome this painful experience by working extra hours and keeping myself busy.

My faith in Jesus was my hope as a young-single-immigrant that things will be better. As I reflect on this holiday season, I am super grateful for my wife, two daughters, friends and my LAC family which God has blessed me with. Through them and with them, I find joy not in busy-ness but through faith.

Loneliness is a toxic poison that can rob our joy, but God told us that he will never leave us nor forsake us.

Tsega Worku, Director of Counseling

Ministries

Today marks the six-year anniversary of my amputation. As you might imagine, it was by far the most difficult experience of my life to date... I was in the hospital twice that fall for a total of almost two months. By the time December rolled around, infection had taken hold of my body in a way I never dreamed possible. So back I went to the hospital. I felt so horrible. I felt for sure the end was near. Finally, the docs came in and told me I would certainly be dead within a matter of days if they did not remove the foot. My response was immediate – please remove it. In the days after the surgery, my world was completely obscured with the unknown. I had no idea what life would be like...

It was Advent, usually my most happy time of the year, yet here I was without any clear picture of my future in my new physical being. And then one day, a multitude of angels literally showed up in my room. They filled my room, all around my bed, completely took up every inch in the room and poured out into the hallway beyond. They started singing, a cappella in four-part harmony. Christmas Carols. I laid there, weeping tears of joy. Unmitigated joy in the midst of great struggle and uncertainty.

That multitude of angels was a portion of our choir...

There is no way for me to adequately describe the joy I felt. I knew, regardless of my physical state, I was part of a family and regardless of the muck I may be in, they would always be my family. There were many friends that came and encouraged me, that sat with me during those days. It was God's love manifested

in the actions of my family in Christ that gave me the ability to claw my way back to existence... and thrive once again...

I'm SO very grateful for that joy. It IS VERY REAL...

Alicia Steinhaus, Director of Lake Avenue

Community Orchestra

So, Siri, why do we need the manger? We need it because we need joy to sustain us in this world. We need a joy that that does not come and go depending on our circumstances. We need joy that remains deep down and is not eradicated by trouble. And, Jesus said, "I have come that *"my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."* Just as Elizabeth and the child within her were filled with joy when they met the child within Mary, may you know that ineradicable joy that comes in Christ today – to his glory.