

Sermon – “Leap of Joy”

Sunday, December 23, 2019

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:26-38, 39-45

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When compared to the other New Testament Gospels, the Gospel of Luke is known for its dominant emphasis on Christology, especially its noteworthy account of Jesus’ birth. It is fascinating, however, to find that it begins with a foretelling story of a miracle child, John the Baptist. After proclaiming the blessing of conception to an exemplary Jewish couple<sup>1</sup>, whom are past the age of child bearing, Luke captures and sets the stage for greater miracle – virgin birth – and humble birth setting of Jesus. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

Luke 1:26-38 NRSV

In the sixth month [of Elizabeth’s pregnancy] the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” 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 will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God.” 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.

Today’s second text follows our first reading from the Gospel of Luke. A sudden joy ignites as a conversation between Mary and Elizabeth takes place. This conversation a precursor to the famous Mary’s Magnificat. Now hear the Word of God for you from Luke 1:39-45.

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

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<sup>1</sup> John the Baptist’s father, Zechariah, was a priest and Elizabeth, the mother, was a descendant of Aaron (Luke 1:5).

Title of the sermon: Leap of Joy

The text: When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry... "For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy." Luke 1:41-42a, 44

Let us Pray: O Mighty One, who has done great things for us, by your Holy Spirit let your word leap in us and bring to our yearning the joy that comes with new beginnings and renewed lives. As we prepare our hearts and decrease our inner voices in order that your Word may be greater, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen. (Luke 1:49)

This is a story of a mother who has shared with me one of her greatest joys of her life.

I anxiously waited for my daughter to return home from school, frantically pacing myself around the house thinking how I should react to her once she opens it. I was curious, but at the same time, dreading the possibility of getting the bad news. I found myself praying to God for the tenth time, asking Your will be done, but if possible, hear the desperate prayer of this mother. When she came home, I passed on a sealed envelope after a brief, mundane conversation, anxiously waiting for her to read the content of the letter from the university she has been waiting for. Next thing I remember was that both of us were screaming and leaping, realizing she has gotten a chance to fulfill her dream.

When was the last time you were leaping for joy? I hope some of you had a leap of joy recently, as you reunited with a beloved one, celebrating a monumental moment such as a getting straight A's at school, or exchanging Christmas greetings with longtime friends. Today's Scripture teaches us how to respond to the joyous moments of our lives.

Although the phrase leaped for joy refers to the action of John the Baptist while still being in Elizabeth's womb, we need to recognize that Mary was the first one to make a leap of joy first. After angel Gabriel annunciated to Elizabeth and Mary, two different responses occur. While Elizabeth remained in seclusion for six months after being pregnant with John,<sup>2</sup> Mary "set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country".<sup>3</sup> For a teenage girl to venture out into the wilderness in haste through a rough hill countryside, Mary must had a similar experience of emotions as the mother who was expecting the possible news that might change her daughter's life. Mary was so full of joy that it made her leap into action and led her to share in Elizabeth's joy!

The different reactions of Elizabeth and Mary tells us about how to respond to a joyous event. It shares with us that we should joyously celebrate other people's blessings as if it were our own and be joyous in every circumstance in our lives. The first part is easier to understand. As the second greatest commandment tells us, we need to love our neighbor as ourselves,<sup>4</sup> the same goes for the other emotions, for love conquers all.<sup>5</sup> Hence we should be able to share their burdens of loss, suffering, and mourning as well as the goodness, joy, and peace with our neighbors.

To understand being joyful in all aspect of life, we need to look at the differences between Elizabeth and Mary. Both were notified of conceiving a child by the angel Gabriel, but they were in vastly different circumstances. Elizabeth was an older, wiser woman, married to a priest - which likely came with power and respect. Through baby John, Elizabeth was getting back her status as she credits God for taking "away the disgrace I have endured among my people."<sup>6</sup> Mary, on the other hand, was a teenager who was engaged to Joseph, and she had everything to lose by this pregnancy: her marriage,

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:24

<sup>3</sup> Luke 1:39

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 22:36-40

<sup>5</sup>1 Corinthians 13

<sup>6</sup> Luke 1:25

her small recognition in social circles, and even her life (for adultery was punishable by being stoned to death as a woman). Even so, Mary finds a way to rejoice, as her famous Magnificat starts out by stating “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior”<sup>7</sup>. Likewise, Paul finds a way to be joyous even while writing in a prison to the Philippians<sup>8</sup>. So whatever circumstance we find ourselves in, we need to be joyous in a blessed moment as well as in the dark valley moments or somewhere in-between.

One of the ways to find a joy in all circumstances is to determine what factors contribute to it. As Christ followers, are we joyful because of positive circumstances in our lives in advent season or are we joyful because we are celebrating the birth of a Christ child? Are we physically manifesting our understanding of God’s redemptive love through expressing our joy during Christ-mas (Christ’s Mass)? The truth that we need to ask ourselves is “is Jesus the reason for the season?” Even during our not-so-best times we need to ask, “is Jesus the reason for the season?” for the Bible tells us there is a season for everything and a time for every matter under the heavens in accordance with God’s will.<sup>9</sup>

Let us recall our last three weeks of Advent here at Westminster. I have witnessed children of Westminster Co-op Preschool coming together for the winter holiday party, where they were leaping over snow globes made of a balloon, creating a peppermint scented ornaments, spending joyous time with their family and friends over pizza. I have seen the joy on the face of volunteers at Contact Ministries’ Christmas Giveaway, as they filled our Parish Hall with toys to make it look like an aisle from a Toys R’ Us, envisioning how one bag could make a difference in another family’s Christmas. I have experienced the love from those whose hearts leaped with joy as our children from the Bridges lead in a singing of carols at Concordia. Friends, our joy does not require exchange of gifts. It is through the sharing of our first love, that being Christ’s love, that brings the joy in our lives. We can have these blessed moments because of the birth of a Redeemer and that must be the reason that we celebrate Christmas leaping with joy.

The most remarkable finding about this passage for me is the joy that comes from faith in both Elizabeth and Mary. As they are pregnant with child, they are trusting that God will fulfill what was promised, and they are speaking of it as if it is already done in faith, speaking in past tense. They are not worried about changing of diapers, getting up in the middle of the night for feeding, possible illnesses that might be life-threatening, or even a possible decree from a king that brings fear to all families with little children. The reason that John, who is in utero, leaped for joy is that he too, like Elizabeth, already knows he is in the presence of the one who is more powerful, of whom he is not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.<sup>10</sup>

We should not be amazed that John was leaping for joy in the womb at all. When Jesus was asked by a Pharisees to quiet down the crowd during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus answered, “if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”<sup>11</sup> It was also Jesus who said that, “if you have a faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore as a people of faith, we should not be surprised when a mountain leaps for joy from here to there if John or we fail to leap in joy in the presence of our Savior today.

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 1:46b-27

<sup>8</sup> Philippians 1:12-19

<sup>9</sup> Ecclesiastes 3

<sup>10</sup> Luke 3:16

<sup>11</sup> Luke 19:40

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 17:20

Therefore, let us celebrate this Christmas, our Christ's birth, as if it was our own spiritual birth remembering our own baptism; let us hold on to our faith that our eternity is secure in Christ, hope of fulfilling what God has prepared for us, and as Paul so eloquently shared with us, "and now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, let us leap with joy by showering one another with abundance of Christ's love. Amen.

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<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:13