

Hoping for Joy

TEXT: Luke 1:26-56

Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on December 17, 2023

The opening salvo of the Gospel of Luke is an entire chapter devoted to two women getting pregnant. The two women are Elizabeth and Mary, and they're relatives. Some translations use the word "cousin." Cousin was a less defined relationship than it is today, but they were kin, with Elizabeth considerably older than Mary, maybe even of a different generation.

Their initial circumstances are quite different. Elizabeth is married to a priest named Zechariah, and we know she's older because she has given up on the hope of conceiving children. Elizabeth's infertility has been the great pain of her life, not only because she would like to have a family, but because a woman's sole purpose in her day was to have children, particularly sons, who could carry on the family line and the father's legacy.

When Elizabeth says in Luke 1:25, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people," she's not exaggerating. A barren woman was, in that time and culture and in too many places still today, a disgrace; and it's a tribute to Zechariah that he kept her as his wife. Many other men didn't.

So, when Gabriel shows up to tell Zechariah that Elizabeth is going to have a son, here at her age after all this time, God's blessing of fertility lifts Elizabeth up out of that disgrace. She remains in seclusion for five months—perhaps an indication that she's miscarried before and doesn't want to make anything public until she's really sure this amazing thing is happening.

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, carrying the boy we will come to know as John the Baptist, Gabriel has another baby to announce. This time the circumstances are almost reversed. Mary is young. She's engaged but not yet married. There have been zero attempts to test her fertility. While Gabriel gave the news about Elizabeth's baby to her husband, here the news is given directly to Mary.

But, in this case, the news doesn't lift Mary from disgrace; rather it threatens her with it. To have a pregnancy before marriage—and especially during an engagement, which bound her to Joseph in many ways as if they were already married—was not only something that would be grounds for Joseph to sever their engagement and condemn her to a life of poverty and shame. Because Mary and Joseph were engaged, if Joseph didn't claim the baby, the pregnancy would be considered proof of adultery, and Mary could have been stoned to death for the crime.

In Matthew, we learn that when Joseph learned of Mary's news, an intervention was needed; and an angel came to Joseph in a dream to confirm that he should continue the engagement and take Mary as his wife. When Mary gets the news, and Gabriel leaves, she doesn't wait around until her condition is obvious. She gets out of Dodge and literally heads for the hills, which is where Elizabeth and Zechariah live—a good distance from Galilee in the Judean hills to the south. "Sorry, Joseph, got to run. Elizabeth is in her sixth month and needs some help!"

And there Mary stays for the remaining three months of Elizabeth's pregnancy, as the two women—one joyfully looking toward something she has wanted her whole life and the other more than a little confused and wary about her own condition—try to process what in heaven and on earth is going on. This time together with Elizabeth is critical for Mary. As you heard in the reading, the baby in Elizabeth's womb, now big enough to start kicking around, leaps for joy, causing the Holy Spirit to speak through Elizabeth and declare both Mary and the fruit of Mary's womb to be blessed.

In the presence of Elizabeth, and having received *her* assurance of blessing rather than death-worthy disgrace, Mary is free to proclaim the words we now call The Magnificat, beginning, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name." She's settled now; it's a good thing. She will be safe; God is with her. And, in that safety, joy breaks through.

Last week I introduced the concept, as articulated by Steven Charleston, of “the long thread of hope,” a spun cord of hope that isn’t realized in a day or a week or a year, but that people have to hold onto, typically through great distress, often across generations.

Luke is a brilliant writer, and I think what he’s done here in the opening sections of his Gospel is to capture the moment when the long thread of hope is passed from Elizabeth to Mary. The long thread represented generations of Israelite hope for the Messiah, who many believed would be manifest in the return of the great prophet Elijah.

When Gabriel is explaining to Zechariah God’s plan for their baby, Gabriel tells him that, “With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

As a priest, Zechariah has been holding the cord of that messianic hope for his people all his life, as has his struggling wife, Elizabeth. And here it is, Elijah—or at least Elijah’s spirit—coming in the child they never believed they would have, connected to the Messiah they hoped for but thought they likely would never see.

And then, at the end of nine months, just as John is about to be born, Elizabeth hands off her part of the long thread of hope to Mary. Elizabeth may be giving birth to a son with the spirit of Elijah, but that baby is jumping for joy at the one taking shape in Mary’s womb. Something more is yet to come. Elizabeth recognizes it and passes the cord to Mary with a blessing. Mary accepts it all with joy in the Magnificat. Then, just as John is born, she returns to her home in Galilee to see how this will all play out.

Earlier in the service, we lit the candle of joy on our Advent Wreath. Originally, I had a different Bible passage picked out to use for a focus on joy. But, as I did my inevitable dive into the word for joy, it led me to Mary because of Gabriel’s greeting to her in Luke 1:28. If you spent time as a Catholic, you’ll recognize the beginning of the rosary prayer, “Hail, Mary, full of grace.” With the exception of using her name, that’s a literal translation of Gabriel’s greeting.

But what isn’t obvious in English is that the greeting “Hail!” in the King James, or just “Greetings,” in more modern translations is the same as the word for “Rejoice!” The word for “favored one,” in our pew Bibles is a cognate for the word for grace, which is itself derived from the primitive Hebrew root for joy.

The realization that the angel greets Mary here by directly connecting joy and grace, made me stop and take notice. If joy and grace are both variants of the same root word, I wanted to dig into the relationship. It’s a personal thing with me. Paul tells us in Romans we are saved by grace—we sing it every time we pull out Amazing Grace. And if you had to pull out just one word to describe the core theology of Methodism, that word would be grace. I felt like I had a handle on it—prevenient grace, justifying grace, sanctifying grace. All of it. I’ve had to pass both written and verbal exams on the nature of grace; and I aced those exams.

Joy, on the other hand, has always been a struggle for me. Of all the things Paul lists as fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, joy is the fruit that is almost never found growing from my particular tree. I’ve been happy on lots of occasions; I’ve been fulfilled, satisfied, pleased, glad, moved to tears by something beautiful—lots of things. But joy? How can I have a firm grasp on grace but be so utterly devoid of joy if the two things are so closely related that the very picky Greek language found it okay to use versions of the same word for both?

I scoured the Bible this week, looking for instances of the word for clues. I found you can be filled with joy, there’s a related word for being filled to *overflowing* with joy. But it’s passive. Unlike hope, joy isn’t something we do, although when we are filled with it the word implies movement—the jumping and leaping attempted by the in-utero John the Baptist—and by grown, fully formed adults in other places. Even nature expresses joy.

You can have joy both alone and shared with others. It’s expressed in dancing and singing, but not so much in speaking. A verse that was a popular praise song when I was growing up, quotes 1 Peter 1:8 in describing a “joy *unspeakable* and full of glory.” And then I noticed a pattern.

The variant of the word when translated as “grace” is used in situations when it’s something being given, while the variant translated as “joy” is the response when the thing is received. That felt important. I come from a family of givers. A couple at my home church once called my parents not “fair-weather friends,” but “foul-weather friends.”

If someone was in trouble, we were right there for as long as it took. But when the crisis was past, poof, we were on to the next person in need. I felt pretty sure my issue wasn't on the giving side.

Something more specific I know about grace is that it doesn't only imply a gift. It's pretty specifically giving something without regard to merit or obligation. In terms of God's grace, we express that in our communion liturgy in the prayer of confession and pardon, "Hear the good news: Christ died for us *while we were yet sinners*; that proves God's love toward us." Methodists practice an open table, where anyone who wishes is welcome to participate in communion, for that very reason. Grace. We don't have to be worthy to share a meal with Jesus at the communion table any more than people in Jesus' day had to be worthy of his presence among them.

When Mary hears the greeting of the angel, she's uncomfortable at first. Mary doesn't feel worthy of the favor, the grace being given her. In the Magnificat, she refers to herself as "lowly." She is troubled, perplexed by the offer; "How am I the favored one? The graced-one?" but she accepts it. "Let it be with me according to your word." But then, once she's had some processing time and validation by Elizabeth, that act of God's grace finally turns to joy, and she sings words that choirs have sung ever since.

It's the same with the shepherds. Like women, shepherds were viewed as kind of a necessary evil. Shepherds were required to protect the flock, but they lived outside with sheep, and they smelled like it. They had no education, their considerable skills not valued. Their wages were low, and if a wild animal made off with a sheep, they had to produce at least a piece of the sheep to prove they had taken on the lion, bear, or whatever to try to get it back. If they couldn't, the cost of the sheep came out of their pocket, if they lived, that is. Shepherds were not allowed to testify in a court of law, but were required to risk their lives for sheep.

And that's the crew God picks to hear an angelic chorus about Jesus' birth? Not kings, not merchants, not the priests at the temple? Shepherds? A gift of grace. For unto YOU is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior. Joy took hold, and they ran to Bethlehem. Grace, fully received, opens the gate for joy.

That receiving part is my problem; but it's not my full answer. We can refuse the fullness of grace for a number of reasons, and one is confusing gifts and wages. We don't feel joy at receiving what we are due, nor should we, really. Getting what we're due is a wage not a gift, and it's an act of justice, not grace, to give it and **in**justice to withhold it. If a wage is unjustly withheld, we might feel great relief to finally get it, but that relief at being treated justly isn't joy. Joy is the response to grace, not to people treating us as we deserve.

So, if think too highly of myself, if I have an inflated sense of entitlement, I won't feel joy because I won't recognize when I've been given a gift that I didn't somehow earn or deserve. I might even be angry if I think what I've been given isn't enough.

But joy can also be blocked in the opposite way if I feel so undeserving that it feels impossible if not wrong to really accept it.

Throughout high school, I played French Horn in the Young People's Symphony of Rhode Island. I came into the orchestra as the third horn. The way our weekly rehearsals ran, if anyone in the chairs above you were out, you took on the next highest seat for that rehearsal to make sure the most important parts were covered.

Early in my senior year, I came to rehearsal and found that both the first and second horn players were out. So, I was suddenly up as principal chair for that rehearsal. We were rehearsing the Overture for West Side Story, which has a lovely, very high, and very exposed horn solo in it for the principal chair. I was sight reading the part.

But hey, no one expected anything...I was the third chair playing a difficult solo that I had never even seen, let alone practiced...no pressure. And I nailed it, taking even myself by surprise. The conductor stopped the rehearsal, and he just stared at me, and everyone applauded. I became the new principal chair of the horn section, overnight.

Fast forward to the final concert of the year with West Side Story on the program. This time, now as the principal chair, it's *my job* to play that solo and a large audience is there to hear us in Veteran's Memorial Auditorium in Providence. The orchestra quiets down in preparation for the exposed horn solo. It starts out fine, but I'm sweating into my horn. I reach for the high note, and...it sounds like someone has just slaughtered a farm animal. A God-awful miss that everyone in both the orchestra and the audience could wince at.

But it got worse. At the end of the concert—being the last of the year—there were recognitions, including the one award always given to a graduating senior, kind of like the MVP award for the season. The conductor announced the award and called my name. I wanted to flee the building, disappear under the stage, anything but walk up and accept that award, after I had made the most obvious blunder of the whole evening. I can still viscerally feel the heat of my humiliation. I couldn't look the conductor in the eye. I shuffled up, took the award, offered a muffled, "I'm so sorry," and almost crawled back to my seat.

Perhaps I missed an opportunity for joy there—a chance to recognize that the award was for an entire year's work, or more likely for me all four years of work, including the time I first played that solo perfectly in rehearsal. I might have recognized it as a moment of grace, realizing that my worthiness on that particular night didn't matter—wasn't even the point—and rejoiced at the unearned favor. Had I dared to look him in the eye, I might have seen compassion. It might have transformed that night.

I still have a lot to learn about joy. But Elizabeth and Mary and a bunch of smelly shepherds are beginning to teach me. Joy is tied to grace. I didn't know that before this week. Amen.