



Luke 1:39-45  
 Forgotten Christmas  
 "Elizabeth's Joy"

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 December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
 Second Sunday of Advent

On this second Sunday in Advent we are continuing our series that began last Sunday on some of the forgotten people and events of Christmas. We also are celebrating and remembering the joy that God gives. This morning's passage is filled with joy. So, let's turn to **Luke 1:39-45**. This is God's word to you and me today.

So, I probably don't need to say this, but just to be clear: **Christmas is all about Jesus**. I mean, there can be no doubt about it – at least inside the Church. Outside of it, actually, with Santa, decorated trees, dreaming of a white Christmas, Black Friday, Cyber Monday...I mean, it's actually easy to forget that Christmas is about Jesus, who is God's gift to us, and is the reason we have Christmas to begin with. In trying to write that sentence, I couldn't remember the phrase "Cyber Monday" as another example of something that distracts us from Jesus at Christmas. I wracked my brain, but couldn't come up with it. Finally walked down the hall and I had to ask Lauren and Paul for help on the word "Cyber" because I couldn't think of it. It made me feel really old. ☺ But I decided it's better to forget *that*, than to forget that Christmas is really all about Jesus.

**But: When you start out with Luke's biography of Jesus, you actually wouldn't realize at first that it's about Jesus.** He starts with a word to his friend, Theophilus, to whom he's writing. Luke lets him know that he's done his research, talked to first-hand witnesses about the events surrounding Jesus, and that he has written everything down in the pages that follow.

And then the first thing he writes about is this husband and wife named Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah is a Jewish priest who serves in the Temple in Jerusalem, and they have not been able to have children. But the angel Gabriel appears to him, tells him they're going to conceive, and that this baby will bring them great joy. Zechariah is kind of dumbfounded by this experience and announcement, and expresses his doubt that this could happen because he and Elizabeth are getting up there in age.

Well, you don't question God's messenger like that without consequences, and the angel makes him mute. He can't speak. And sure enough, he and Elizabeth conceive and are expecting a child, who ends up being named John.

Then Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel as well, letting her know that she will also conceive, though it will be through the Holy Spirit, and the child she gives birth to will be called the Son of God – though the name he will be known by is Jesus.

Well, Mary and Elizabeth are niece and aunt. And as we read a moment ago, Aunt Elizabeth is about 6 months pregnant when Mary goes and pays her a visit: and it is joyful. **This passage stands out because there's so much joy in it.** Even John, the baby in Elizabeth's womb gets animated and "leaps." Elizabeth is clearly happy to see Mary. In fact, "joyful" is the best word I can think of to describe her welcome of Mary – whether it's the Sunday of joy or not. And I know we might think, "Well gee...of course two ladies who are *expecting* are going to be filled with joy. That's expected. I need help being joyful in challenging times." We need help being joyful when it's not easy. And so, we might discount their joy. Because: **Expressing joy in joyful times is easy.** Right?

For instance, it's easy to be a joyful student when you're getting "A's" in school...but maybe it's harder when you're getting C's and D's...or worse. It's easy to be full of joy when you have a new job with exciting new challenges and new responsibilities and perhaps with a pay increase from your previous one...but it's harder when you have an unhealthy work environment or your boss is a jerk.

But let's step back for a moment and look at their situations. **Is this an easy time for them to be joyful?** The fact is, they both have some challenges they're facing. Mary, for instance, isn't married to Joseph. She's engaged. I know in our day and age, outside of our Christian faith, this is much more common and is more widely accepted, but it wasn't for them. It was shame-inducing. That could easily suck the joy out of her pregnancy, including Elizabeth's joy for Mary. Who's going to believe that she's pregnant because

of God’s Spirit, and not because of Joseph? Sounds a little too convenient, right? And then Elizabeth has her own challenges because her husband is mute. Well, maybe that was actually a cause of joy for her. ☺ He was a religious leader, after all...and sometimes we think of them as real talkers – sometimes we’re even called “Preachers.” Though, even if it was a smidgen joy-inducing, the fact is it would make their relationship much more challenging, and kill any joy she might have. We’re talking 9 months or more of not being able to converse normally. That’s tough.

And then: **We can’t forget the fact that both of them, along with the rest of Israel, are under Roman occupation.** There’s this overarching political and cultural challenge that’s impacting them all. It’s this cloud that just hangs over them all the time, not unlike the pandemic we are in. The pandemic is an overarching thing that has stolen a lot of people’s joy. So many people have gotten focused on the limitations that the pandemic has brought upon us. They’ve focused on the limitations that medical professionals and government officials have recommended or placed upon us – like masks and vaccinations requirements. And so many people have allowed those things to steal their joy.

**But in Elizabeth and Mary we see a model of joy in the midst of societal upheaval and governmental turmoil and even oppression in a very big-picture, broad, cultural way.** Even in the midst of all of that, they have joy. They don’t let the negative, difficult, or undesired aspects of life suck the joy out of them. Why?

The answer is found in Elizabeth’s final statement to Mary: **“Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!” (Luke 1:45).** We see here that joy which transcends our circumstances is found in our relationship with the Lord...with God our heavenly Father...and particularly as she says here: believing Him. Not believing *in* him, but believing him. Trusting His word. Believing him to be faithful to his promises. That’s where joy comes from.

So often we try to find joy in other things – with the emphasis on “things.” We think a new car or tv, or a present under the tree, or whatever else we

might buy with our money, will bring us joy. I'm not against "stuff." We need these things. But sometimes we ascribe more power to deliver joy into our lives than they can live up to. Or they promise more than they can deliver. And have you noticed that as you get older, the things like that from which seek to derive joy get more complex and expensive? When my kids were younger, it didn't even need to be a toy they held in their hands that brought them joy. The garbage truck stopping in front of our house and raising the garbage can up and emptying its contents into the truck was enough to bring squeals of joy. They didn't have to own the truck. They didn't even need to touch it. Just watching it brought smiles to their faces. It brought joy. How many of us find joy in that now? We *should* find joy in the garbage truck, because someone else is picking up our trash and recyclables for us....but instead we grumble about the garbage bill, right? We let that steal our joy!

**So, Children are a wonderful reminder, and inspiration, of finding joy in the simple aspects of life, and in our relationship with God.** It helps that they're not so aware of the challenges and worries of life, which oftentimes overshadow our joys.

You know, Jesus once turned to some children who were gathered around him, and used them as an example of the kind of faith we're to have. In fact, he says, "Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child, shall not enter it." Now, we can't say 100% for sure what the kids around him were doing, or what their demeanor was like in that moment. Maybe they were screaming and throwing tantrums. But I kind of doubt it. I suspect they were laughing, playing, maybe trying to climb on Jesus like they were playing "King of the Mountain" and he was a human mountain to them. My guess is there was a fair amount of child-like joy in them.

**And in Mark 10:13-16 (see also Matthew 19 and Luke 18) Jesus says, "That's how you're to come to me. That's how you enter the Kingdom. That's how you are to receive what I offer" (Pastor Brian Paraphrase).** I've experienced this different approach between kids and adults this school year. I happened to mention very briefly last week about my music teaching in the LWSD. And the elementary band program, which for 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>

graders is a before school class, is still online. We're not meeting in person. I think some of that is due to bus driver shortages (part-time job opportunity for someone!) as well as concerns about spread of Covid. But since it's not a class that's built into the school day the same way it is for middle school or high school kids who would be in a band class in 3<sup>rd</sup> period or something like that...the district decided to keep elementary band and orchestra online this year.

And those of us who are teaching have griped about it. Believe me, I've had the conversations with different orchestra and band teachers...and we adults are great at complaining about the situation. Do you know how many complaints I've heard from the 50 kids that Cameron Steadman and I teach in our band class? Zero. If there have been any, I can't remember them. Maybe there was one or two at the start of the year. Those kids are there, listening, playing their instruments, engaged in the class, and it's awesome. And after class each day Cameron and I will have a post-class meeting between the two of us to critique our teaching and plan for the next day's lesson...and sometimes we'll complain about the online teaching, because there are things we'd like to do, but can't online: like play as a group. Too much delay from one of us out to the group, and then back to all of us. It just doesn't work. So we complain – probably once a week. But I do not recall the kids ever doing so. They're having a great time...a joyful time...learning in band, while the two band instructors are sometimes having the joy sucked out of us by the situation.

**Jesus invites us to be more child-like in our approach to him and to find our joy in life through that relationship, and Elizabeth totally shows that.** She understands that. She's not letting anything from government occupation to muted husband to niece's unusual pregnancy get in the way. "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" Elizabeth is speaking about Mary's belief...but clearly, Elizabeth also believes. She trusts God. She could have let so many things get in the way of her joy. But she knows God is a God of miracles – she's got that in her own life – and she's filled with joy. She greets Mary with a joyful heart, and a statement that helps us see where our joy comes from.

I think the verse from Habakkuk that was a part of our Advent Candle lighting litany puts it well: Habakkuk 3:17-18 says, **“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior” (Habakkuk 3:17-18).** Living with joy is a decision we make not to let challenges and difficult circumstances steal our joy. Here in Habakkuk, it’s the equivalent of no food in the fridge and none at the store...or no money to buy food at the store. It’s bleak. But there’s joy “in the Lord...in God my Savior.”

Please don’t hear me saying that we can never grieve a loss or express our broken heartedness. We need to do that. But they need not keep hanging over us, and even in the midst of those situations there can still be an inner joy that shines through the cracks of our broken selves. And that kind of joy comes from the Lord...from believing Him. “I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.” Elizabeth lives that out. She’s found her joy in the Lord, even when other things could have gotten her down. I pray we would as well. Whether it’s a shiny new gift that promises joy but ends up underdelivering, or something that happens that causes genuine heartache, or the pain in the rear that the pandemic is (and it is a pain in the rear!) ...whatever you face this Christmas season: don’t forget joy. Let Elizabeth, this forgotten woman from 2,000 years ago, help you remember where true joy comes from: from believing God. Let’s pray...Amen.