

## Leap for Joy

*preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on December 16, 2018*

Our last Scripture reading this morning is about Mary's visit with her cousin Elizabeth. As told in the gospel of Luke, our reading takes place immediately after Mary receives word from the angel, Gabriel, that she is to be the mother of Jesus and right before Mary delivers her well know Magnificat.

Luke 1:39-45.

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

This morning as we enter into the third week of Advent, the theme we are called to reflect on is the theme of joy. To help us achieve this end, we have already lit the third candle on the advent wreath, which is the candle of joy. We have sung hymns of joy. Our Scripture readings reflect this theme. And now as the Word of God is proclaimed, there are three questions I would like for us to consider as we continue to develop this theme. First, what does it mean for us to be a people of joy? Secondly, why is it important that we possess joy in our lives? And thirdly, how do we possess the joy of the Lord?

As we begin to address these questions a good place to start is with a definition of the word, "joy." Without consulting a dictionary and just using my linguistic instincts, I would say that in everyday Canadian conversation, the word joy is just another term for happiness. No more and nor less.

However, in the Christian vocabulary, joy has a much more specific meaning. While the physical symptoms of joy and happiness may be similar, the circumstances that trigger the feelings are different. In the case of happiness, the good feelings are generated by positive events in life. It may be a milestone event like a wedding, the birth of a child, or a promotion at work. It may be an everyday event like a fine meal shared with friends, or a nice walk on a beautiful summer day.

But, regardless of whether the triggering factor is a major or minor event, the important thing to notice is that the positive feeling of happiness is only present

when good things are going on. In other words, it takes happy events in life, to make happy people. Joy, on the other hand, has its source of pleasure completely rooted in the Divine. It is triggered by an encounter with God and it is maintained by clinging tightly to the revelation of God that has been given.

This pattern is clearly seen in the heroes of faith that we read about this morning. Starting with Elizabeth, it is easy to see how the source of her joy was her profound connection with God. This connection started early in life, no doubt, however, it must have taken a huge upswing in her later years as her womb was miraculously opened. Furthermore, I am sure this sensitivity heightened as the prophet within her continued to grow, and as a result, her joy increased.

Continuing with the pattern, Mary enters Elizabeth's house, and now Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. This experience elevates her connection with the living God even more and compels her to loudly declare words of victory, celebration, and prophecy. It is these encounters with the living God that form the foundation of Elizabeth's joy.

And even though she was happy that she would bear a son, and even though she was happy that the shame she had carried as a barren woman all her life was now being lifted, and even though she was happy for a lot of things, these circumstances were not the source of her joy. Her joy came from her connection to the Divine. Her joy came from the Lord.

Turning to Mary, her joy was also rooted in the same place. For she too had encountered the Divine and that connection filled her with joy. As the Scripture tells us, Mary's first great encounter with God was mediated through the angel Gabriel. Her connection to God was also strengthened through a miraculous conception that was even greater than that of her cousin's. For in Elizabeth's womb was a mighty prophet. But, in Mary's womb, lay God the Son.

And it was this connection to God that was the source of Mary's joy. And like her cousin Elizabeth, Mary's joy was not dependent upon life circumstances. In fact, this truth is even more apparent in Mary's life than it was in Elizabeth's. And the reason being, in Elizabeth's case, her pregnancy brought her public honour. In Mary's case, her pregnancy brought her public shame.

And yet, in the face of all the hardships that must have come Mary's way as she nurtured the life of Christ within her, these challenging life circumstances could not steal her joy. Again, for evidence of this just continue on in Luke chapter one and read Mary's words of praise that flow from her spirit. She was filled with the joy of the Lord.

Finally, the person whose joy I find most intriguing in the passage we read this morning is John the Baptist's. From the earlier verses we did not read, we know John still has another three months to go in the womb before he is born and even at this earliest of ages, he is making prophetic declarations. At this point in his life he doesn't know what any words mean, he can not make a sound, he can not see - he is still very much in formation, and yet, he is filled by the same Holy Spirit that has filled his mother and through the Spirit he recognizes Mary and the cousin whom she bears and he leaps for joy in his mother's womb. Even at the earliest of ages, John is filled with the joy of the Lord.

And because he is so helpless and innocent, I think he best personifies the definition of joy; which is a deep sense of pleasure that is rooted in our relationship with God and is not dependent on the circumstances of life.

This is what the joy of the Lord looks like. And this is what God has called us to be. A people who are so connected to Him, a people who are so aware of His presence, a people who are so committed to the revelation that has been entrusted to us that our satisfaction in life is not dependant upon the regular ups and downs of human existence.

And why is this important? What difference does it make if we possess the joy of the Lord in our lives? A couple of things come to mind. First, there is no pleasure in this life or the life to come that is higher than the joy of the Lord. While there are lots of things in this life that feel good, and I will let you fill in the blanks here, yet, whatever pleasure you may chose as number one, nothing can compare with the joy of the Lord. Furthermore, to believe otherwise is to be deceived and to live otherwise is to pursue a life of idolatry. That is why we learned in our catechism classes, right at the very beginning, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. Why? Because the joy of the Lord is a pillar of the Christian life.

A second reason the joy of the Lord is so important for the people of God to possess is because it is an essential part of our witness to the world that Jesus is Lord. After all, why would anyone want to be a Christian if the only ones around are always grumpy? It is not a good endorsement!

On the other hand; if we are a people who have a sense of wonder and awe for who God is and what God is doing in the world, people will be attracted to Christ. If we are a people who can see what God is up to in this world and if we can show others the same, people will find hope. If we are a people who can maintain good spirits no matter what storms life throws at us, those around us who lack faith may all of a sudden stop and consider that perhaps following Christ may be a viable alternative to the self centered hedonistic lifestyles so commonly lived today. This

is why it is important for us to possess the joy of the Lord.

And with that answer we now only have one question left to ask from the three I raised in the introduction. And that question is, “How do we possess the joy of the Lord?” In response, a few answers come to mind. The first is “grace.” Or to use the proper Presbyterian term, “prevenient grace,” which is a fancy way of saying how God finds us, as opposed to us finding God.

Again, turning to this morning’s reading for examples; in the case of Elizabeth, Mary, and John, God is the one taking the initiative. God is the one who has the plan. God is the one who makes His plan known through his servant Gabriel. God is the one who opens the womb. God is the one who sends His Holy Spirit. God is the one who connects with His people and in the process becomes the source of their joy. It is all about God.

A second observation is that the joy of the Lord comes through faith. In the case of Mary and Elizabeth both had great faith. Even when there were many unanswered questions and the way forward was anything but smooth sailing, the faith they demonstrated in God’s goodness allowed them to maintain the joy that God had placed within them. As Elizabeth said to Mary, “Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!” While the joy of the Lord is a free gift of God, it is maintained by faith.

Thirdly, the joy of the Lord is shared in community. That’s why as soon as Mary received the good news, she went to share it with her cousin Elizabeth. And as they were together they both rejoiced aloud over what God had done for them and for Israel. While they could have maintained their joy by themselves, joy is always fullest when it is shared. It was true for the saints of Biblical times. And it is true for us today.

So as we continue to journey through this season of Advent together, may God reveal Himself to us in such a way that we receive His joy. May God grant us the faith that lets us hang on to the good news we have been given, no matter how the details of our lives turns out. And finally, may God grant us the grace and good sense to share the joy He desires to give us with each other and with the world, so that our joy may be full and that our cup may run over; all to the glory of God.