

## **“The Light of Grace: Joy – Elizabeth”**

**1 Samuel 2: 1-10** Then Hannah prayed and said: “My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance. 2 There is no one holy like the Lord; there is no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. 3 Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the Lord is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed. 4 The bows of the warriors are broken, but those who stumbled are armed with strength. 5 Those who were full hire themselves out for food, but those who were hungry are hungry no more. She who was barren has borne seven children, but she who has had many sons pines away. 6 The Lord brings death and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and raises up. 7 The Lord sends poverty and wealth; he humbles and he exalts. 8 He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor.

For the foundations of the earth are the Lord’s; on them he has set the world. 9 He will guard the feet of his faithful servants, but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness. It is not by strength that one prevails; 10 those who oppose the Lord will be broken. The Most High will thunder from heaven; the Lord will judge the ends of the earth. He will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed.

**Luke 1: 39-44** 39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill His promises to her!”

**1 Peter 1: 3-9** 3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8 Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Let me start this morning by asking you a question? Why do you think I start out every Worship service with, “Good morning, Doster Church, the way I do? Would it

have the same impact if I began the service with “Greetings and Salutations my dear brothers and sisters in Christ?” I am not asking rhetorically, I really want to hear what you think. (give time for answers) Good answers! The reason I started beginning the service this way is to set the tone for what is to come. I don’t want our worship of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to be boring. I don’t want it to be all serious and subdued. Yes, there is a time for everything and there are times in worship where tears are warranted and we grieve with one another just as we laugh with one another as the “Family of God” in Doster. But I want to say to whomever walks in to this space on a Sunday morning that this is a time for joy, for giving praise, honor, and glory to God, not a somber time of accumulating knowledge. Today, there is another reason for my excited and joyful greeting. It is to help you to understand the excitement and joy that Elizabeth felt toward Mary’s visit, and toward her own pregnancy.

When you see someone, a special someone, one you haven’t seen in a long while, someone who is a good friend, or someone whom you love, do you just go up to them and say “hi” like Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh and extend your hand for a handshake? Do you nonchalantly walk up to them and say, “Hey, how’s it going?” No! Most likely, unless you’re a preteen or a teenager who is trying to be cool, you run to that person and throw your arms around them and give them a hug. If it is a family member, you may kiss them and not let go of that hug for a good long while. You have joy, because you get to see someone you love or, at the very least, really like!

That is nothing compared to the joy Elizabeth had. First of all, like her ancestors Sarah and Hannah, whose song we read from the Old Testament today, and several others, Elizabeth was unable to have children, or so it was thought; because she was way past the age of childbearing. When the angel Gabriel came to her husband, Zechariah, to tell him that his wife was going to have a baby, Zechariah had trouble believing and doubted the angel’s words, so, as a sign, and some might say a punishment, the angel said to Zechariah that he wouldn’t be able to speak until after the child was born. So, as it says in the Gospel of Luke, Elizabeth conceived and was pregnant with John, who would later be called John the Baptist, when Mary, the mother of Jesus, who is at the same time pregnant with Jesus, comes to visit. [NOTE 1]

As soon as Elizabeth hears the voice of her cousin Mary, baby John leaps for joy in his mother’s womb. Can you imagine how that must have felt to Elizabeth? Talk about a kick! This is not a foot extending out but an entire leap for joy, inside Elizabeth’s womb. Yet, Elizabeth knows and understands the meaning of all this how? Because she is old and wise, NO. Because she is perfect, and just knows things? NO. It is because, as it says in our reading, she was filled with the Holy Spirit. Too often, we think of the Holy Spirit as the author of crazy things like “speaking in tongues” and charismatic or Pentecostal kinds of things. And we forget that the Holy Spirit guides us in wisdom, teaches us, helps us remember what we have read, what the Bible says, calls things to our minds. In this case, because Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, she immediately knows that Mary’s child, the one in her womb, is the Messiah, the Lord.

Mary's visit to Elizabeth in Luke 1:39-45 represents the intersection of the previously parallel, but as yet unconnected, stories of these two women found earlier in the chapter. Luke begins his gospel by introducing the miraculous conception of John and then the conception of Jesus. Luke maintains a literary structure in each story that is duplicated in the other. In both cases, the parents' childless state is mentioned and explained (vv. 5-10, 26-27). In both cases, the listeners are troubled by the angel (vv. 12, 29), and the angel tells them not to be afraid (vv. 13, 30). In both cases, there is a proclamation of a son's forthcoming birth, a son whose name is already determined, and a son who will be great (vv. 13, 15, 31-32). In both cases, the angel is questioned (vv. 18, 34), and a sign is given to authenticate the angel's words (vv. 20, 36). Mary's sign, moreover, is this: "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" (v. 36). The stories, brought close by a similar form, now connect by means of the familial relationship between the two women. Verse 38 ends with a poignantly beautiful scene in which Mary accepts both the honor and the responsibility God has given her ("Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"), and Mary departs to visit her cousin, about whom she has just been told.

As Mary enters the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth, these stories conflate briefly into one. As they do, the priority of Mary and her unborn son becomes apparent. Mary greets Elizabeth, and two important things happen highlighting this priority: One, Elizabeth's baby is said to have "leaped in her womb," and two, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, proclaims a blessing on Mary (v. 41).

The symbol of Elizabeth's baby leaping in her womb is both a visually descriptive detail and an interesting OT image. In the story of Isaac and Rebekah, the latter, who once had been barren, miraculously becomes pregnant with twins. But while in the womb, the unborn twins "jostled" each other. Rebekah is told that this jostling symbolizes the coming discord between the nations that would descend from each of the twins (Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25). The prophecy ends with the rather foreboding quotation: "and the older will serve the younger" (v. 23, NIV). The prophecy does, in fact, come about, and the story of Jacob and Esau, as well as their descendants, is one of strife and anger. Yet in the story of Elizabeth and Mary, there is no indication or hint of jealousy between the two women, nor any between the two unborn sons. In fact, quite the opposite is true. In Elizabeth's praise of Mary, she reiterates what the story has already told us: that her baby leapt in her womb at the sound of Mary's arrival. Yet in Elizabeth's prophetic telling, she adds the detail that the baby leapt *en agalliasai* "in rejoicing," or "for joy." This is a transformation of the story of Jacob and Esau. Here the "older will serve the younger" becomes joy and thanksgiving.

The same holds true of Elizabeth's own relationship to Mary. As already alluded to, the essence of Elizabeth's blessing is the priority of Mary's position, even over Elizabeth's own. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth attests to the honored state of Mary with phrases such as "blessed are you among women," (v. 42) and "why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" (v. 43). [NOTE 2]

As I mentioned earlier, it is obvious that Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, because it is apparent that Elizabeth is given knowledge of Mary's pregnancy itself, as well as of who the baby will become. This once again brings the stories into a parallel structure: Mary is told of Elizabeth's pregnancy by the angel Gabriel; Elizabeth is told of Mary's pregnancy by the Holy Spirit.

Another theme of Elizabeth's praise of Mary centers not merely on Mary's status as the one carrying the Lord but also on Mary's faith. She is blessed not only for the fruit of her womb (v. 42) but also because she has believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was promised to her (v. 45). Mary's active belief in the angel's words, in God's promise, gives her more reason to be called blessed. Through all of this, Elizabeth expresses wonder and joy without jealousy. [NOTE 3]

Mary then continues on to utter her *Magnificat*, as found in verses 46-55. Mary elaborates on the themes of Elizabeth, praising God for recognizing her lowly state and for showing his mercy and might. Her *Magnificat* both directly quotes, and alludes to, parts of Psalms, Job, Micah and Deuteronomy, as well as Hannah's song in 1 Samuel. As Elizabeth has praised Mary for being favored by God, so Mary praises God for her state as a favored one. And once again, Mary's priority over Elizabeth is maintained, both subtly through the length of her canticle (more than twice as long as Elizabeth's utterance) and through her own acknowledgment of the state God has given her (rather than a reciprocal blessing on Elizabeth's similar state). [NOTE 4]

This scene, then, between Mary and Elizabeth allows us to begin to understand the direction that God's purpose has taken. God's work through the two women, and the sons they would bear, is to be seen as one singular act. Both sons have miraculous conception stories, similar in content and in telling. Both have great purposes. Yet when they are brought together, the singular purpose is made clear through the priority of the one Son. Jesus takes precedence over John. Yet this passage of Scripture also clearly emphasizes the joy with which the lesser accept ones accept their positions. This event is like no other, and therefore it's without irony and with breathless joy that Elizabeth exclaims, "Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" (v. 43). [NOTE 5]

Sometimes we get a little too comfortable in our Christianity. Sometimes we start to take the wonderful things like faith, trust and joy for granted. When you take something for granted for too long, it loses its excitement. We lose the joy we should have. It is almost as if absence does not make the heart grow fonder. Not that we would ever want Jesus to be absent from us, nor that we would want to lose faith so that we could appreciate it more when we got it back. We wouldn't wish that even on our worst enemy.

What do we do then? How do we recapture the joy? Well, I know this may come as somewhat of an obvious conclusion for many, but joy comes from the Holy Spirit, and joy from the Spirit is revealed in words—our own words and the Word of God. When Elizabeth heard the words of Mary, John, who was not even born yet, was filled with joy, and both Mary and Elizabeth were able to express **unimaginable joy** in words

that we still use today in our church services. John would grow up in that Spirit. He would learn the Word of God from the Old Testament and proclaim it to thousands who would come to be baptized by him in the Jordan river.

I encourage you, with the time you have left this Advent season, to take some time out of your busy schedules, yes, carve out some time, even if you have to use a chainsaw to do it (figuratively of course), to read God's Word. Let His Word flow into your eyes and ears and wash over your heart. Take in the stories, such as the one for today, with new and fresh eyes as if you are reading or hearing them again for the first time. Study Luke 1 and 2 from a different perspective as an adult. Imagine what it was like for each of the different characters: Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph, Mary and others. Ask me questions when you don't understand something or when you are wondering about something. No matter how busy I am, I am never too busy to talk about God's Word! **[NOTE 6]**

When you get into God's Word and let the Holy Spirit work in your heart and head, then you will be able, once again, to experience joy. You will have a richer appreciation for all that the Father has done for you by sending his Son. You will become even wiser unto salvation. Oh, what joy it is to know: Our heavenly Father loves us so! Get into God's Holy Word, and experience the joy of your salvation.

So here it comes. What are you going to do about it? What's your plan? What are you aiming to do? If you aim for nothing, you will hit it every time! Please take a minute, what is your plan? Please write down, "I will ... read the Christmas story in Matthew and Luke this week," or whatever works for you. Okay, let the Holy Spirit fill you with the Joy of the Lord! Let's pray ... Amen.

Sermon Notes for "The Light of Grace: Joy"

Based on 1 Samuel 2: 1-10, Luke 1: 39-44, & 1 Peter 1: 3-9

Given at Doster Community Church the 3<sup>rd</sup> Week of Advent December 17, 2023

- I. At the voice of Mary, Elizabeth and the child she is carrying (John the Baptist) are filled with Joy! How did they know?
- II. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. This explains her knowledge and the joy. If you are having trouble feeling the joy of the Advent season, maybe you need to pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit.
- III. The essence of Elizabeth's Holy Spirit inspired blessing attests to the priority of Mary's position over Elizabeth's and to the honored state of Mary with phrases like "blessed are you among women," and "why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?"
- IV. Both sons (John and Jesus) have miraculous conception stories, similar in content and telling and both have great purposes. We do well to take note of the joy with which Elizabeth and John accept their positions.
- V. We must guard against becoming too comfortable in our Christianity. We must not take the wonderful things of faith, trust, and joy for granted. Pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Ask to be filled with unimaginable joy. Make some time to read the Christmas story and think about it.
- VI. What are you going to do about it? Please write an "I will ..." statement indicating what you will do this week. Let the Holy Spirit fill you with joy!