

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Moved by Joy

Luke 1:39-45

In today's text, we meet an interesting pair. Elizabeth, wife of an old priest, and herself way beyond child-bearing years. And Mary, a teenager who's on the track to marriage, yet already has life stirring in her womb because of the work of the Holy Spirit. Neither one of them should be pregnant at this point in their lives. But, as is often the case, God has other plans. And God's ways are not our ways. Once he decided to send his Son into the world, God did not dispatch Gabriel to someone at the top of the social ladder. Instead, the angel of the Lord showed up at the home of a teenage girl in a backwater town in a remote part of the Roman empire. For the next nine months, she is the one who will carry the Messiah in her womb.

Meanwhile, in Elizabeth's womb, a little preacher boy is already six months underway. He's alive and kicking. The minute Mary walks in the door and shouts, "Elizabeth, it's me," John the Baptist starts attempting somersaults in his mommy's belly. Even before he draws his first breath outside Elizabeth's womb, John is already doing what he will spend most of his life doing—bearing witness to Jesus.

And according to Luke, little baby John didn't just leap; He leaped for joy. There's a celebration going on in Elizabeth's tummy, a celebration that soon spills over. In fact, Elizabeth is so full of the Holy Spirit that she begins shouting to Mary, "God has blessed you among all women, and he has blessed the child you will have! And why should I be so blessed that the mother of my Lord has come to visit me? As soon as your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy" (vv. 42-44).

There's something about joy that can overtake you. It overtook Mary as well. Soon she starts singing. "My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (vv. 46b-47). Everywhere you look in the first chapter of Luke, there's rejoicing going on. Even old Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, whom God had silenced because of his unbelief, suddenly gets his voice back and offers a solo to the Lord for the great things the Lord has done.

There's a wonderful story about a six-year-old girl who got a brand new Bible at Sunday School. She walked proudly into the worship service with the Bible tucked under her arm. She sat down with her family and put the Bible down between her and an elderly man sitting in the same pew. The man picked up the Bible and asked the little girl if he could look at it. "You can look at it, but don't open it," she warned. "You might let God out!"

These folks we meet at the beginning of Luke's Gospel are people who know that God is out and on the move, accomplishing his will for the world. They know that they are in the presence of the Lord. And where the Lord is present, there is joy. That's why joy can thrive in times and places where we least expect it. Joy can erupt in a nursing home or a hospital room. Joy can break loose in a prison cell or a drug rehabilitation center. Joy can bubble up in a funeral parlor or a refugee camp. Joy can erupt on a military base or in a shelter for

the homeless. You see, joy depends less on positive conditions and more on the presence of God's saving grace.

In fact, if joy were primarily about attaining the good life, then Mary, Elizabeth, and the rest of the cast here in Luke probably wouldn't be singing and shouting. After all, these are people on the margins of society. True, because of their place in the Christmas story, they've become famous and familiar to us. But we easily forget that in their own day and time, the individuals who occupy such a prominent place in our church Christmas plays were among the least and the left out. In the eyes of the society's movers and shakers, they were largely invisible. But God doesn't see things the way we see things. Instead, he sends his angel out to the edge of society. That's where things start shaking. That's where joy starts to break out.

This joy that comes from above is what Mary and Elizabeth experienced in their own lives. It's the kind of thing that often surprises us and makes us reconsider our own plans and priorities. I like the way that preacher Barbara Brown Taylor describes Mary's situation. She says,

Joy doesn't happen when we get what we want. Did Mary want what happened to her? It is much more likely to happen when we do not get what we want and we find ourselves laughing instead of crying, because God's ideas are so much better than ours, only we have a hard time seeing that until our own wishes have crashed and burned. It is there, in that wilderness, in that empty-handed, I-give-up surrender that joy is most likely to occur.¹

Wherever the grace of God arrives and finds a humble heart, open and obedient to his plans and purposes, that's where joy can fill and flow and move. According to C. S. Lewis, "Joy is the serious business of heaven." And if, as we believe, the life of heaven descended to us here on earth through the coming of God's Son, our Savior, that makes joy our business too. So as we continue to worship now through our adult musical, may God's presence move us to rejoice with one another.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Surprised by Joy," *The Living Pulpit*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (October-December 1996) 17.