

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Luke 1:39-55

Leap for Joy

December 17, 2017 ~ Third Sunday of Advent

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Introduction to Luke text:

Today on this Third Sunday of Advent, we jump from the Gospel of Mark over to Luke—The gospel writer who does not rush the story. Mark jumps right in at the bank of the River Jordan with Jesus fully grown, as you may recall from last Sunday's sermon. The Gospel of John goes cosmic on us, (we'll get to him next Sunday) and Matthew gives us 17 verses of prologue before his birth narrative. But Luke lavishes 80 verses of story and prophecy before we get to "the story," we are so ready to hear, "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered..." (we'll get that one next week, too).

But today we are in Luke with Mary and Elizabeth, not rushing the birth story. And men—I'll have to warn you, there isn't a man in plain sight. It's the story of a conversation between two women. Two pregnant women. In fact they are women who have no business being pregnant. Elizabeth is too old. She has suffered the shame of being childless her whole life, and now that she is "getting on in years," her dream of having a child is being fulfilled. On top of being very old and pregnant for the first time with a baby boy who would become John the Baptist, her husband Zachariah, a priest, can no longer talk. He was made mute by the angel Gabriel when Zechariah simply asked, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years" (Luke 1:18). Elizabeth is too old and Mary is too young. Mary isn't married yet, only engaged, and is still a virgin. But these two women who have no business being pregnant are not whispering behind closed doors. They are not freaking out about what's going to become of them. No. They are shouting and singing. What do they have to shout and sing about?

Imagine with me for a moment, that we are neighbors of Elizabeth, on our way back from the well with our daily water supply. We live in the hill country, more like Rib Mountain, than Marshfield, so we take a moment here to catch our breath. Walking up hills with those water jars seem to get harder with every step. Gossiping makes a good distraction. So we've been talking about Elizabeth. "Did you hear? It's juicy. She isn't gaining weight—she's pregnant. And do you know why Zechariah has been missing his shifts at the sanctuary? It's because something strange happened to his voice. He can't speak at all! I hear they made up some story about the angel Gabriel appearing to him at the altar of incense. Yeah, right! This is a good spot to take a break." So we set down those heavy water jars, and then we start to hear a loud commotion at Elizabeth's house. She and... is that her cousin Mary? They are talking so loudly, is that singing? Great timing. They are so loud, we can hear every word!

Sermon

Oh... my... God! Can you believe what we just heard? I always thought Elizabeth's family a bit on the strange side. But her cousin Mary, where does she get off? She's not even married—and she thinks she's carrying; she is pregnant with, our long awaited Messiah? The Son of God? This cannot end well. What a scandal. The juiciest one of all: This is beyond belief. Who does she think she is, singing the words of our prophet Samuel's mother, Hannah? Mary is from the two-bit town of Nazareth for God's sake, a peasant girl who doesn't have an ounce of sense. Surely this can't be true. This can't be the way our Savior comes to us, can it?

What did Elizabeth and Mary have to sing about? How could these two women possibly be so filled with joy? Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband has stopped speaking and is about to be out of a job and Elizabeth is in hiding. Mary has said “yes” to a crazy proposition by the angel Gabriel, resulting in a pregnancy that would normally by law, be punished with execution by public stoning. And yet we just heard two canticles of praise, two women whooping it up, when you'd expect them to be having panic attacks.

Mary's song of irrational, unreasonable faith, drew upon Hannah's song that she sang just after she gave her weaned miracle child, Samuel, to the priest, Eli. The promise of Mary's impossible birth, the most impossible one in a long line of impossible births, starting with Abraham and Sarah, was the surest sign that God was on the move again. God on the move in a way that was absolutely traditional, “Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus,” and at the same time revolutionary and unprecedented. Shocking, if you think about it.

Elizabeth and Mary were singing because they had both taken huge leaps of faith. They did not know where they would land, but they knew it would be in a new and different place than they had ever been before. And they had faith that it was God who had put the spring in their spiritual leap. Therefore somehow all would be well. The unborn in utero John the Baptist got them started—prophesying even before he is born, with a well-timed leap for joy in Elizabeth's womb. And Mary, rejoicing in the promise of what God will do through the baby Jesus whom she will bear. Mary is a prophet in this passage and she is about to enter another kind of wilderness. Yet this passage vibrates with joy and anticipation. But that is not all.

What strikes me about this story in Luke, undergirded by the Isaiah 61 prophecy, is the surprising mixture of justice and joy. If you really listen to what Mary is singing about, it's revolutionary stuff: scattering the proud, bringing the powerful from their thrones, lifting up the lowly. How is that going to really work? “Filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty”? Good luck with that. And yet, in the moment she also says, “my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” There's the joy, even here where Luke starts to cast the shadow of the cross. Likewise, the words from Isaiah are backlit with the realism and tragedy of

a broken people, returning from captivity to their Temple destroyed, and their culture in ruins. Yet we hear in that moment words of joy, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God." Joy in the context of mourning, loss, and utter devastation. Joy at the promise of bringing good news to the oppressed.

We know how slow, how difficult, how seemingly impossible, the march toward systemic justice really is. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice" (As Dr. Martin Luther King famously quoted the Unitarian abolitionist minister Theodore Parker). Long indeed, and the bend is less than perceptible all too often. So we have to ask, how can these prophets be jumping with joy, leaping with anticipation over something that takes months, years, decades, centuries to accomplish? And not only is it slow work, it is hard work; it takes sacrifice, beyond what can possibly be imagined.

I believe the joy is in the leap. When we take the leap of faith, we don't know exactly where we will land. But we know we will be in a different place than where we were before. Are you wondering how to get off of dead center in your life? Are you troubled by the brokenness of our political system and wondering how it could possibly get better? Well, God seems to prefer to move in ways that we think are impossible. The story of the birth of Jesus is a prime example. I think every leap of faith sets the world aright, just a little. Justice jumps forward, one small leap at a time.

What would Mary's song be today? In some ways, very similar to what she sang that day at Elizabeth's house: End child poverty. Fill the hungry. End trafficking. End homelessness. End mass incarceration. Welcome and resettle refugees and immigrants. Slow down global warming. Yes, these are huge. But they are not too big for our God who came to us as one tiny baby who caused the unborn prophet John the Baptist to leap for joy.

Bringing it closer to home, just this past week here at First Presbyterian Church, 27 nutritious lunches were packed in our kitchen by 16 hands of FPC members from two young children and a teen to a senior Deacon, as part of the N.O.W. (Nutrition on Weekends) program that feeds children in Marshfield and the surrounding community on the weekends for whom this may be their only meal until Monday when they go back to school. Just yesterday, 15 brave souls, 15 undocumented friends we just met, from our surrounding community came to FPC to learn about their rights at the "Know Your Rights" program we hosted here in the Parlor. They came because of many small footsteps, many small flyers, and small leaps of faith on the part of the organizing team. Our Green Team is starting a campaign to reducing the use of plastic straws in our community, one household, one restaurant at a time: One small way to slow the destruction of our ecosystem. These are all signs of the Kingdom that I think make God leap for joy at the promise being fulfilled, one tiny leap of faith at a time.

What does this have to do with Christmas? Blessed is she, blessed is he, and blessed are they who believe there will be a fulfillment of what was spoken

to us by the Lord. That's the leap. I will give the last word to poet Ann Weems who puts it this way in her poem, "Christmas Comes."ⁱ

*Christmas comes every time we see God in other persons.
The human and the holy meet in Bethlehem
or in Times Square,
for Christmas comes like a golden storm on its way
to Jerusalem—
determinedly, inevitably. . . .
Even now it comes
in the face of hatred and warring—
no atrocity too terrible to stop it,
no Herod strong enough,
no hurt deep enough,
no curse shattering enough.
For someone on earth will see the star,
someone will hear the angel voices,
someone will run to Bethlehem,
someone will know peace and goodwill:
the Christ will be born!*

Leap for Joy! Amen.

ⁱ Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, (Westminster Press: Philadelphia, PA, 1980), p. 61.