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The Blessing of Believing

Luke 1.39-55

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Singing is something we associate with Christmas – whether it’s going caroling as we did a week ago or the Who’s down in Whoville (the tall and the small) or singing along in your car to soul stirring songs like *Dominic the Italian Christmas Donkey*, or *I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas* (Only a hippopotamus will do. Don't want a doll, no dinky Tinker Toy, I want a hippopotamus to play with and enjoy...).

In the Gospel of Luke singing is associated with the birth of Jesus and not just from the angels heralding Jesus’ birth. Months before that, as Pastor Nate shared last Sunday, there was **Zechariah**, the father of John the Baptist, ending his nine months of divinely imposed silence with a song of praise about God’s mercy coming like the dawn. In Luke 1, **Elizabeth and Mary** both break into songs of praise to God when they greet each other and learn that each is pregnant and expecting to give birth to a special son. We heard Elizabeth’s song of praise earlier in the service, but I want to point out that **three times, Elizabeth uses the word “blessed”** regarding Mary. ***“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”***

Listen to Mary’s song in **Luke 1:46-55**, “And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in **God my Savior**, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me **blessed**; for **the Mighty One has done** great things for me, and **holy** is his name. His **mercy** is for those who fear him from generation to generation. **He has** shown strength with his arm; **he has scattered the proud** in the thoughts of their hearts. **He has brought down the powerful** from their thrones, **and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has** helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his **mercy**, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

In **Luke 1:39-55** we meet two women who, moved by the Spirit, raise their voices in praise to God for **all God has done**. The first is **Elizabeth**, the older cousin of Mary,

and the wife of Zechariah, a temple priest in Jerusalem. Elizabeth will be the mother of John the Baptist. Like two significant women who lived long before she did, **Sarah** (Genesis) and **Hannah** (1 Samuel), Elizabeth was unable to have children; until the unexpected birth of John. Elizabeth is important not just because of her family relationships. When she greets her pregnant cousin Mary she's filled with the Holy Spirit, and "*exclaimed with a loud cry ...* " This phrase in Greek means to shout, literally a "big" voice. This is how Elizabeth speaks a prophetic word to Mary, and to us -- in what we might call her "outdoor" voice.

The second woman in the passage is **Mary**, the younger cousin of Elizabeth. Mary will be the wife of Joseph, and the mother of Jesus. Like Elizabeth, Mary is important for what she has to say, in addition to whose mother she will be. Mary's words are like those of her cousin Elizabeth. They each express their own song of faith praising God for acting in their lives.

Some of us may identify with Elizabeth. We may find it hard to trust God because of the heartaches, struggles, disappointments, or losses we've had personally or because of some of the violence or tragedies we've heard about in the news. Some of us may have trouble trusting God if we've been like Elizabeth - waiting, hoping, and praying for years and not seeing an answer or getting an answer we didn't want. We may find it hard to trust after years of emptiness and seeming silence from God. "*What have I received for my faith, service, devotion, and prayers – there are still problems in my family, my health, my finances, God why haven't you done something?*" Sometimes it's like we're holding one piece of a puzzle and wondering why it doesn't seem to make sense to us. Yet God had something special planned for Elizabeth and Zechariah in their old age, just as God had done years before with Abraham and Sarah, which would enable them to be a blessing to the world in a way they couldn't have imagined when they were younger.

Sometimes people think life has passed them by or that they have already made their greatest contribution, but like Elizabeth and Zechariah God may surprise you when you're older with a significant contribution to make. We've been blessed at BBC through many decades to see people in the fourth quarter of life make some of their most

important and impactful contributions as part of our church after they've retired from their careers. Elizabeth thinks that God hasn't heard her prayers and that she's been forgotten, yet God had something in store for her that exceeded her highest hopes, and we still remember Elizabeth's song of praise and her son all these years later. In life, as in football, it's important not to give up hope or to quit in the fourth quarter. The game isn't over until it's over, and things can change quickly, surprisingly, and dramatically. All you must do is say to a Patriots fan, 28-3, and they instantly know what I mean.

Some of us may identify with Mary rather than Elizabeth. Mary's a young woman with hopes and dreams of her own, but God gives her an opportunity to be the instrument of tremendous blessing to the world. But it means changing her goals and expectations and trusting God for something unheard of and completely unexpected. Gabriel told Mary (Luke 1:31-33), *"And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."* That's a lot for anyone to try and comprehend. Mary remembered these words from Gabriel, but she didn't know all that it would mean as far what Jesus would do.

For Mary, following God's plan requires being vulnerable to having her own heart and hopes pierced (Luke 2:35) which is true not only of her but of all parents. Every parent has hopes and dreams for her or his children and when those hopes are dashed, as will be the case for Mary, who will outlive her son and witness his death as a young man, it's wound that strikes at the heart of our being that we carry and learn to live with for the rest of our lives. We think of all the parents and families that have lost children, and our hearts ache with theirs.

Luke notes that Mary stays with her older relative Elizabeth for three months (1:56) and then goes home, presumably after Elizabeth gives birth to John. Since Zechariah had doubted the angel's word to him about having a son, he was silent and unable to speak. After six months Elizabeth may have been ready to have someone to talk with who could respond, and she and Mary had three months together to talk and support one another. Someone could write a great song or story imagining those three

months. Maybe they have and I don't know it, but what a joyous time it must have been for those two women. What expectant mother hasn't waited for the first stirrings of a child? The joy of Mary and Elizabeth is the joy of all who look forward with wonder and thankfulness to the birth of a child – even as we do at this time of the year. **Joy** is peaked by waiting. Just ask a child in these last days before Christmas.

Joy is a recurring theme in Luke's Gospel. The joy bursting forth in the angel's visits and announcements and the births of John and Jesus is heard and seen again throughout Luke in **the joy of** forgiveness, healing, new beginnings, redemption, and the transformation that we see in those who trust Christ. The Gospel of Luke ends with the disciples returning to Jerusalem **with joy** and praising God in the Temple.

Our response to God's sending Jesus to save us and to save the world, is one of **joy**. Elizabeth praises God and blesses Mary for two reasons: She's been chosen to be the mother of Jesus, and she believed the word of God. Many of us have seen and some of you may even have stickers or magnets that say, "Jesus is the reason for the season." I understand where that's coming from, but it's also true to say that you and I are the reason for the season. It's the fallenness of the human heart, it's broken sinful humanity, unable to save itself and in need of redemption and intervention. You and I are the reason for the season, because God so loved the world that he gave us the Son to save us. We can be thankful that Jesus came for our sake. We can choose to be a sister or brother of Jesus. We can believe the Word of God and trust there is a blessing for us in believing as well. It helps to know what God's Word says which is why I encourage you to join us in reading through the Bible in 2025.

How are you feeling as Christmas draws near? John Lennon's song *Happy Christmas*, begins: "*So this is Christmas and what have you done? Another year over And a new one just begun.*" Christmas is a good time to reflect on how you've spent the last irreplaceable year of your life – what have you done with it? A new year will begin soon – what will you do with it? Like with Mary and Elizabeth, what is God longing to birth and bring to life in you and through you if you believe? How can you be a blessing to others as Elizabeth and Mary were?

So, this is Christmas: A time of angels and dreams and mystery. A time of reversals and surprises; a time to believe and trust and dare to say yes to the Mighty One whose name is holy. A time to remember the words of Mary's song, whether we like all of them or not, that God opposes the proud, the powerful, and the rich, and is on the side of the humble, lowly, and poor. A season in which a merciful God will help us no matter who we are if we'll ask. Whether you're struggling with grief, loneliness, a key relationship, your health, physical pain or a difficult diagnosis; with finances, purpose, or hunger; or whether you're grateful for the abundance of God's blessings in your life, or some combination of all of the above; we can lift our voices in praise because God has sent Christ for us and especially Mary says for those who recognize their need for him the most – the lowly, the humble, and the poor.

Some of you have seen the recent movie about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, there's a letter Bonhoeffer wrote to a friend describing what life was like in a German prison during World War II, as bombs fall, and windowpanes shatter and fellow prisoners cry out in fear. *"Life in a prison cell may well be compared to Advent; one waits, hopes, and does this, that, or the other—things that are really of no consequence—the door is shut, and can be opened only from the outside."* Even so, he adds, faith can provide comfort in such times: *"the calmness and joy with which we meet what is laid on us are as infectious as the terror that I see among the people here at each new attack. ... We are neither of us dare-devils, but that has nothing to do with the courage that comes from the grace of God."*

Unlike the Apostle Peter's experience in Acts 12, no angelic messenger rescued Bonhoeffer. He died waiting and hoping; the Nazi SS executed him a few weeks before his prison camp was liberated in the waning days of World War Two in Europe. In one of his Christmas sermons, Bonhoeffer wrote, *"God is not ashamed of the lowliness of human beings. God marches right in. He chooses people as his instruments and performs his wonders where one would least expect them. God is near to lowliness; he loves the lost, the neglected, the unseemly, the excluded, the weak and broken."*

At Christmas, God joined humanity, opening the door from the outside, to free us for the day when we will join the angels in an unrestrained heavenly chorus.

If you were to write a song for Christmas about God acting in your life, what would you call it? What would it sound like? How would it go? Or to think about it another way, what familiar or popular Christmas song is the one you identify with most this year? Christmas is a time when God invites us, like Mary, to decide about the direction of our lives. Mary had faith that God's promise to her would be fulfilled; that's what Elizabeth commends her for. *"And **blessed is she who believed.**"* **There is a blessing that comes with believing.** Not just for Mary, but for any of us. Mary needed to trust God and so do we. Just as some of us like old songs at Christmas time, Mary's song is patterned after **the ancient song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10** and it's a classical statement of God's activity: God brings down the mighty and lifts up the lowly. **Hannah, Mary, and Elizabeth** all had to trust God in difficult circumstances, and we're challenged and invited to do the same. Those of us who wish to be found with Christ and with the Mighty One whose name is holy want to make sure we're among and with the humble, the lowly, and the hungry because Mary tells us that's where God's mercy is found and with whom God's mercy and love are to be shared. It's for these especially that Christ comes to earth and turns the world's values and priorities upside down.

Let's Pray: O God, help me know how much I need you... And if I think I don't need you, or that I can get by without you on some days, or for months and even years at a time - then help me see my folly & lead me home to you... I need you to be there for me, Lord, I need you to come on my behalf, to be my strength, my guide, my advocate, my help, my healing, my hope, my Savior...

Teach me to hunger for time with you, for prayer... Teach me to thirst for your truth, your wisdom and your counsel... Teach me to long for the peace that only you can give, the peace I so much want & need... Teach me to be poor, Lord, and help me know that your love is the greatest treasure I might ever find and possess... You hear the cry of the poor: hear the cry of my poor heart and help me hear the cry of those in need... Amen.

Blessing: May God bless you with hope, joy, and peace this Christmas.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. The words Elizabeth speaks to Mary Luke 1:42-45 are crucially important to Mary believing and trusting in God. Can you think of a time when someone spoke to you in a similar way to give you hope and assurance? Try and recall that conversation and why it was important to you.
2. What is one of your favorite Christmas carols or songs? Why do you like it?
3. In Mary's song in Luke 1:46-55 she celebrates a few of the attributes of God – which do you appreciate the most? Why?
4. Mary's song declares hard truths about the proud, the powerful, and the rich and what God is going to do to them. What do these verses mean to you? What do you take from them?
5. How does your life reflect God's concern for justice, mercy, and deliverance? Do you think Mary would perceive you to be among the proud and rich or God's humble servant? What evidence would she have to reach that conclusion?
6. Joy is a recurring theme throughout Luke's Gospel from the first chapter to the last. How would you describe the relationship between believing and joy? How is the joy of the Lord present and demonstrated in your life?