

Leaping for Joy

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Luke 1: 39-45

Delivered on December 23rd, 2018 at Northminster Presbyterian Church

You might be a little confused by our gospel lesson today, especially if you were in church last week. You might be confused because you think that as we get further along in time on the Advent calendar, we ought to be moving further along in time when it comes to what we're reading in the bible. In other words, last Sunday we talked about John standing in the middle of the Jordan River, preaching and baptizing in the river, and you might expect that since it is now a week later in the season of Advent, we ought to be talking about what happened after that. But no, we aren't moving forward, we are moving backward. In fact, we are moving backward about thirty years to the story of John's birth, which is also part of the story of Jesus' birth. Let's call today's story the story of Mary and Elizabeth.

The story of Mary and Elizabeth is one of the most beautiful stories in the bible. I have only told it once or twice before in sermons, but I always like to tell the story. Elizabeth was Mary's cousin, and by Mary, yes, I mean that Mary. We don't know much about Elizabeth but we know she was unable to bear children. We also know that she was married to a priest named Zechariah, and together she and her husband had lived righteous and holy lives.

Well, one day Zechariah the priest was in the temple doing priest stuff as he offered incense on the altar of the Lord. Zechariah was alone in the temple, but suddenly he saw a visitor. The angel Gabriel appeared before him standing on the right side of the altar. Zechariah was afraid as I probably would be too, but Gabriel told him not to be. He told him that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son, and she was to name him John and he was to prepare God's people for the coming of the Lord. He told him that John should spend his life keeping away from wine

and strong drink and that he would have the spirit and the power of the Old Testament prophet Elijah.

So, Zechariah listened to all of us this, and naturally he was full of questions. One such question was “How do I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” But the angel Gabriel didn’t like this question and because Zechariah doubted him, he shut him up and made him unable to speak until the baby was born.

Well, Elizabeth conceived a child as the angel had said, and this John who was now growing in her womb was the one we would come to know as John the Baptist, the strange man that I told you all about last week.

Well, now we come to the part of the story which I’m sure you all know quite well. That same angel Gabriel then appeared to Elizabeth’s cousin Mary who was living in Nazareth and told her “Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you.” He went on to say “Do not be afraid for you have found favor with God. And now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Like Zechariah before her, Mary asked how these things could be. She was not barren like Elizabeth, but she was a virgin. But for whatever reason, Gabriel went easier on Mary than he did on Zechariah and he explained that all this would come about because of the power of the Holy Spirit, through a God for whom nothing is impossible.

Well, as I said you know this part of the story, and you’ve probably known it ever since you were a small child, but in the part of Gabriel’s speech to Mary that we usually skip over when we tell this story, he goes on to tell Mary about her cousin Elizabeth, and Mary upon hearing

this, set out to a town in the hills to visit her cousin. When she finally arrived and she saw Elizabeth, she greeted her and the fetus John who was growing inside her leaped in Elizabeth's womb. That's right. The infant who would grow up to be John the Baptist, the infant who would grow up to pave the way for the coming of the Lord leaped inside his mother Elizabeth's womb at the sound of Mary's greeting.

Now, you know what, I imagine that if you are a bit of a tough minded person, you may be a little bit skeptical about this idea that this baby leaped inside the womb. You might say you aren't sure if you buy that. But you know what, while I have had my doubts from time to time about things that are written in the bible, while I myself am tough minded from time to time, I want to tell you I don't have any doubt that this is exactly how things happened. I want to tell you that I fully believe that the baby in Elizabeth's womb didn't just kick, and didn't just hiccup, but actually leaped for joy at the sound of Mary's greeting.

And why, why do I give up my tough-minded skepticism or forget about me, why would I also invite you to give up your tough-minded skepticism and believe this story happened in history just as it is written. Well, to tell you why. I will tell you why, but first I have to talk about something that I admit I know nothing about. Now you see, I know this will come as a shock to everyone here, but I have never been pregnant. I do not know what it is like to be pregnant, but I do know this, I know that pregnancy is something that you have to be a woman to understand. And if you are a woman this is something that will go on with your body in which no man has a right say to you, "I know what that's like." Not only do I not know what it is like, as a man, I can't even imagine what it is like. You know there are some experiences in life where you don't know what they're like, but you can kind of imagine them based on other experiences. For

example, I have never been in a helicopter, but I've been in a plane many times, so I can sort of imagine what it would be like to be in a helicopter. But I cannot imagine what it is like to have a human being growing inside my body because I have never had anything like that before happen to my body, nor will I ever by virtue of my gender. This is something that you have to be a woman to understand.

And Mary and Elizabeth were two women in the same family who were going through pregnancy at the same time. Though they were in different stages of their pregnancy, they were both going through pregnancy at the same time and both of them for the first time. Now, since I have never been pregnant myself, I don't know much about this, those of you in the congregation who have been can tell me more about this. But I imagine that when two women are pregnant for the first time and at the same time, with everything else being equal, there is a special understanding that goes on between them, a special bond between them, if you will. But not only did Mary and Elizabeth share the bond of being pregnant together for the first time, they also shared a bond that their pregnancies didn't make any sense. You already know why Mary's pregnancy didn't make any sense, I don't have to retell you that story, but Elizabeth's didn't make any sense either. She was post-menopausal, she was post-menopausal by a long shot. She wasn't supposed to be pregnant either. And they both had something that was happening to them that was only possible because of God. In many ways, Mary and Elizabeth could not be more different. Elizabeth was an older woman. Mary was a young woman, if we can even call her a woman. Elizabeth had been infertile all her life, she had tried and tried to have children with her husband Zechariah to no avail. Mary knew nothing of a long and frustrating struggle to have a child or of any kind of struggle to have a child. Elizabeth was

the mother of the end of something. She would give birth to John the Baptist who represented the end of the old covenant. And Mary was the mother of the beginning of something. The new covenant. The new testament as we call it. Mary and Elizabeth could not have been more different. But you know what, it didn't matter how different they were. What a bond they must have shared. It didn't matter how different they were, and we are told that they were in the same family, but they could have been in different families, they could have even spoken different languages for that matter. Even so, what a bond between them.

And so we are told that when they saw each other, at the sound of Mary's greeting the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy. I believe that, and I believe that because I believe that Mary's greeting made such a joyful sound that it was a sound like no other sound in the world. You know, when I was a kid I used to sing that song, "I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart, down in my heart, down in my heart." And then we would sing, "down in my heart to stay." But you know what, in spite of what that song says, joy doesn't stay down in your heart. When you are joyful people know. When you are angry people know, when you are calm and peaceful people know. When you are anxious people know. Now, I am not suggesting you can't fool people. Of course you can. That's why we have poker. But you can't wear a poker face, forever, can you? You can't, because pretending is exhausting. Have you ever been really angry at someone and tried pretending you weren't angry, how long did that go on? Not very long, did it? It came out when you blew up over something minor, didn't it. You can't pretend forever, it's going to come out.

And not only will people know, and here's the part of my sermon where you're going to tell me I've lost my mind. Fasten your seat belts, are you ready. Because not only will people know,

but all of nature will know. What do we sing on Christmas? “Joy to the world the Lord is come... and heaven and nature sing, and heaven and nature sing.” I read about an experiment once where a group of people had two plants, the same kind of plants. And they treated them both the same way, they gave it the same amount of water, the same amount of fertilizer, the same amount of sunlight, but one of them they spoke to in a kind and gentle voice and the other one they bullied. They bullied the plant. They insulted it. They told the plant it was ugly, and that they hated it, and they yelled at it. Which one do you think flourished and grew beautiful green leaves and stood up nice and tall, and which one do you think turned brown and withered up and died? So don’t tell me that the baby didn’t leap inside Elizabeth’s womb at the sound of Mary’s joyful greeting. Don’t tell me it didn’t, because I know it did.

What we await in these final days of Advent, what the hour is pregnant with, is of course the birth of the Christ child, but I hope that we remember it is about the birth of more than just the Christ child. The whole event of God’s coming to earth also gave birth to a new community, to a new people who share a bond that they do not share with anyone else in this world. And like Mary and Elizabeth, those of us who share a bond in this community may be different from each other. We may be very different. But in spite of that, we share a bond that those of us outside this world may have no understanding of at all. We share a bond that causes us to see love and mercy as strengths when the world sees love and mercy as weakness. We share a bond that causes us to see human beings as infinitely valuable, when the world sees human beings as nothing more than consumers at best, or at worst occupiers of space who doing nothing more than overcrowd and overpopulate. We share a bond that causes us to value allegiance to God, before allegiance to any nation, or race, or political party or anything else in

all creation. The world thinks all this Christianity stuff, and this church stuff is crazy. It laughs at it. Well, let it laugh. My prayer for you during this advent season is that this special bond would bring you the kind of joy that you can't even try to hide. My prayer is that it would bring you the kind of joy that babies can sense inside their wombs, and that all of nature would respond to.