



We Find Joy in Connection

Luke 1:24-45

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

December 10, 2023

In this season of Advent, we are journeying to the birth of Christ using the Gospel of Luke. Unlike the other gospel accounts, Luke provides a lot of backstory to Christ's birth, which helps frame the purpose of the gospel message. We began last week with the story of Zechariah, acknowledging our weariness. The story begins in the truth of our weariness, promising hope and joy even when we find it hard to believe hope and joy are possible.

This morning's text shifts from Zechariah to his wife Elizabeth, and adds in the mother of Jesus, Mary, as it offers the promise that we find joy in connection.

At the end of last week's scripture, we were told that finishing his service at the temple, Zechariah, quite unceremoniously, went to his home. We pick up this week with Elizabeth, who is back at the house.

Luke writes, "After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion."

This opening detail both sets the tone for what will happen next, and it reminds us that Elizabeth's pregnancy is not known to anyone else, outside her and Zechariah. Keep in mind, based on what we learned last week, Elizabeth had never before conceived a child, and she is old enough at this point that it's unexpected she *could* conceive a child.

One might expect that Elizabeth, having conceived for the first time in her old age, would want to celebrate with family and friends the miraculous nature of her pregnancy. But that doesn't happen. That the text says she remained in *seclusion* hints that this isolation was self-imposed. Why would Elizabeth want to remain unconnected during this pregnancy?

In his commentary on the text, scholar John Carroll wonders, "Does this period of ... isolation remove her from the community in which she has experienced shame – owing to her inability to have children – until her pregnancy is obvious?"ⁱ In another commentary, the Rev. Cecelia Armstrong wonders, did Elizabeth question the angel's promise, just as Zechariah had?ⁱⁱ Is her isolation a similar type of angelically imposed silence, forcing her to keep this good news from the community?

Though we may wish to know more, Luke merely offers that when Zechariah came home struck mute, Elizabeth conceived, and she remained in seclusion for the first five months of her pregnancy.

Luke then shifts to Mary with the connecting line, “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth.” This transitional phrase links the stories of Elizabeth and Mary, whose physical connection will soon become far more clear.

The scripture continues, telling us the angel went to “a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.” The context of the time tells us that Mary was a young female, likely no more than 14 or 15 years old; perhaps younger.

The word “engaged” comes from the Greek word *μνηστεύω* (mnace-tyoo’-o). It’s offered in a variety of ways in English translations, but perhaps is best represented with the word “betrothed.” To say she was *engaged* picks up on a modern understanding of marriage where the couple enters into the engagement willingly, and where there is some form of proposal directly from one individual to the next, where the individual has the ability to say “yes,” or “no.” That was not Mary’s situation.

Speaking from a First Century perspective from the Middle East, “Betrothal means that formal consent to the marriage has been given and the man has gained legal rights over the young woman. [However,] she continues to live in her family home under her father’s control ... until the consummation of the marriage and her change of residence to her husband’s home.”ⁱⁱⁱ If you think purity culture today is a bit extreme, you don’t even want to image the purity culture of the religiously devout in the first century. During the time of betrothal, while waiting for the consummation of the marriage, the young woman would have been expected to remain at the family home in isolation from the rest of the community to be sure she did not meet the eyes of a longing man.

Like Elizabeth, who remained in isolation at her family home, Mary too remained in isolation at her father’s house.

It is Mary’s isolation that makes the angel’s visit so startling. “The angel came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.’”

Mary knew that she was not to be socializing with other men, much less strange and random men who found their way into the family house. Remember, purity culture extreme, even the appearance of a man in the house with her would have caused a community uproar and family shame. She was perplexed by the angel and his words, and she “pondered what sort of greeting this might be.”

Gabriel has already experienced this kind of shock and fear at his appearance. Zechariah had the same look of fear in his eyes in the temple sanctuary. So Gabriel responds to Mary, much like he did to Zechariah, “Do not be afraid.” He continues, “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, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his

ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

This is a weighty promise to anyone, much less a 14 year old girl who is waiting to be taken in marriage. Yet, Mary’s initial response seems to miss the magnitude of the promise. At least for now, she doesn’t seem the least bit interested in the whole “Son of the Most High,” or “Reign over the house of Jacob forever” part of the annunciation. She’s stuck at the beginning.

Mary asks, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” She may be young, but it’s clear she’s taken the prescribed Family Life Education courses at school ... she knows what she knows, and she can’t understand how she might conceive a child given her experience ... or lack thereof.

In her response, we begin to see a shift from Gabriel’s interaction with Zechariah, for Zechariah didn’t just question the angel’s proclamation, he demanded a sign to prove it’s reality. Mary doesn’t demand a sign, she just wants an explanation. Mary wants a scientific and anatomical understanding of this promise, “How can this be?”

Gabriel responds, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”

I don’t know how Mary might have received those words; as out an outsider looking in, it feels like this young female, marginalized in so many ways, would have still held a significant amount of concern and fear following this response.

Perhaps Gabriel knew that Mary would still have some questions and curiosity about this proclamation. While Zechariah asked for a sign and was punished for his doubt, Gabriel gives Mary a sign, even though she hasn’t asked for it. The angel continues, “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. For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Keep in mind, Elizabeth’s pregnancy has been kept a secret. Zechariah *couldn’t* tell anyone about it, and Elizabeth secluded herself at home and *hasn’t* told anyone about it. This was new news for Mary to hear.

Mary closes out the interaction with Gabriel with a final statement of affirmation, saying, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

Luke doesn’t pause the narrative. We immediately read that “in those days, Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.”

Don’t lose sight of the context in the rapid movement of the story. Mary was expected to stay in the family home until the consummation of her marriage to Joseph. Upon finding out that she

was pregnant, and that her relative Elizabeth (who it is believed was her cousin) was also pregnant, she decides to go visit Elizabeth. Perhaps getting out of the house, given her new state, was the smartest decision to try and hide her pregnancy from her father and future husband.

But the decision to travel to Elizabeth's home is no small journey. According to tradition, Zechariah and Elizabeth lived almost 80 miles south of Nazareth, in the hill country just outside of Jerusalem. Can you imagine this 14 year old girl, who has just become pregnant, travelling this 80 mile trek by herself? How bad did she have to expect things to become at home when the family found out about her pregnancy to think that this journey was worth the risk? There is no indication that anyone went with her; we are left to understand she undertook this trip by herself, with no one to help or hinder her mission.

When she reached Zechariah's house, Mary greeted Elizabeth, and upon hearing her greeting, the child in Elizabeth's womb leapt, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Remember, Elizabeth's pregnancy was unknown to anyone outside the house until Gabriel told Mary. And Mary's pregnancy was unknown to anyone (aside from her) until she walked in the door and greeted Elizabeth. Mary didn't have to tell Elizabeth about the pregnancy, for the Holy Spirit came over Elizabeth and *she knew*. Elizabeth explains, "As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

It is a joyful union when the two women gather together. It is a celebration felt not only by the two of them, but even by the offspring they carry.

To understand this story in Luke's Gospel as an opening proclamation to the gospel message of Jesus Christ, we have to really understand the situation of these two women, Mary and Elizabeth.

By cultural standards, when the story begins, these two women are as isolated as they come.

Elizabeth, long in years and long without child, finds her husband unexpectedly (and quite unexplainably) unable to speak. She surprisingly finds herself unexpectedly pregnant – something she had long hoped for, but also something she had given up hope for due to her old age. Zechariah, her husband, who knows why she is pregnant, can't explain to her the situation because of his inability to speak. In her lack of understanding and fear, and perhaps because of social stigmas around such an unexpected pregnancy, Elizabeth isolates herself from the community. She remains in seclusion for *five months*.

Mary, a young, 14-ish year old girl, is betrothed to marry Joseph, who is from the house of David. We don't know her family's social status, but that Mary is marrying into the house of David seems like it would be a climb up the social ladder. She's stuck in the house, awaiting the

time when she would be taken, quite literally, by her husband-to-be. Only, again unexpectedly (and quite unexplainably), she finds out that she is pregnant. Such a unexplainable pregnancy would cause her family ruin. She could easily forfeit her marriage, and her family would be taken on the shame of the community. In her lack of understanding and fear for repercussions, she sets out on an 80-mile trek to see her relative, Elizabeth, an unrecommended journey for a girl in her state.

Individually, these women had little for which to be joyful. Their individual stories were isolating and filled with fear.

And yet, as isolated as they were individually, as soon as they enter into the company of one another, the Holy Spirit is present and they are filled with joy. It is Mary's presence that pulls Elizabeth out of her seclusion, seemingly experiencing joy for the first time following her many months of isolation. And it Elizabeth's presence that gives Mary hope for the journey of her own that is really just beginning. She gives thanks to God that Mary has heard the invitation of the Lord and has believed.

It is this kind of joy, the joy that comes in our sharing together, that Luke highlights here at the start of the gospel message. This is the promise of God in the birth of Jesus Christ, that in the glory of the incarnation, we are united together with hope and joy. No matter how difficult our situations may be, the joy of Christ is one that gathers us together and promises that through connection, through our unity with one another, there is hope for tomorrow. So rejoice with one another and give praise for the glory of community, for the gift of God in the birth of Jesus Christ invites us and calls us together to share in the joy of connection. Amen.

ⁱ John T. Carroll. *Luke, A Commentary (The New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

ⁱⁱ Cecelia D. Armstrong. *How does a Weary World Rejoice Resource?* Published by Sanctified Art, LLC. 2023.

ⁱⁱⁱ Carroll.