



Luke 1:39-56
 Living as Followers of Jesus
 “Singing for Joy”

Rev. Brian North
 December 15th, 2024
 3rd Sunday in Advent

This morning we continue in our Advent series in chapter one of The Gospel According to Luke. And although the Sunday’s Advent theme is “love,” it’s not an overly obvious theme in today’s passage as you’ll see in a moment. Instead, there’s much more today about joy and celebration, which really correlates better to last Sunday’s worship through music and the Advent theme of joy that we celebrated last week. But nonetheless, here we are, as we continue to work our way through this portion of Scripture asking God to lead us and speak to us and draw us into a deeper place of discipleship to Jesus through it all. So, let’s dive in to Luke 1:39-56, beginning with the **first seven verses (39-45)**.

So: After Mary’s conversation with the angel Gabriel, which we looked at last week, Mary quickly packs up and heads out on a road trip to go visit Elizabeth. Sometimes in life, you just need to process things, and sometimes there’s really only one person who can help you do that. That’s the case here. Both are having unexpected pregnancies, and both have been announced by the angel Gabriel, and both are aware of each other’s pregnancy. There’s really just one person that Mary could have gone to. And so, she does.

Now, it also helps that **Mary and Elizabeth are related. We get that information in last week’s passage, in verse 36.** Sometimes the word (soon-ge-nayce) is translated as “cousin” which it can mean, but it has a broader meaning of “relative or kinsman.” So maybe they’re cousins as we normally think of them, but maybe a little more distant relationship like second or third cousins, or aunt and niece or cousins once removed or whatever. In our family, we kind of pay attention to that stuff more than most because about 11 years ago, we found out that our kids were in the same elementary school as their third cousins – my second cousin’s kids. We had no idea we were all in the same neighborhood, I hadn’t talked with or seen my cousin in like 15 years at that point...and it turns out that his daughter and one of ours were in the same 2nd grade class, and even in the same cluster of desks, not knowing they were related. A month into the school year when

we figured out the connections, my kids all of a sudden wanted to know all about cousins, second cousins, third cousins, 2nd cousins once removed, and so forth. Anyway, regardless of Mary's and Elizabeth's exact relationship, they're related, and they've clearly met before and know one another to some degree based on the interaction we see between them.

Elizabeth's response is one of joy and excitement, and already expresses an understanding of the Messianic nature of the baby Mary is carrying, as she calls Mary, "the mother of my Lord" (v. 43). And then the joy of the moment extends even to the baby inside of Elizabeth who will be born about 6 months from this point. He will be named John and grow to be known as John the Baptist. Even he is moved by the Spirit in such a way that he seems to leap for joy in her womb.

Then we get Mary's response. Now, before we read this, let me say just a bit about it. You might notice that a lot of English Bibles will have a subheading above this that reads something like "Mary's Song." Those subheadings, as well as chapter and verse numbers, are added by publishers to help us navigate our way around the Bible, and find passages we're looking for. And maybe she did sing this. **Singing was more a part of their culture than it is ours.** For instance, David sang songs, Barak and Deborah sing a song together, Paul and Silas sang when they were in prison. Every once in a while, someone in our household might bust out in song at a joyous occasion – it's usually Gwen or one of the girls....us guys are way too disconnected from our emotions to express ourselves in song – but when that happens, and it's not frequent at all, but when it happens, it's always brief.

And I wouldn't call it "singing" but more of a "sing-song voice." So, it might be something like, "I'm so happy!" which I've heard someone say like that in our household. Or "I have the best husband ever!" which I haven't actually heard...but you get the idea. If the signing *is* ever something more extended in our home, and actual singing, it's a song that already exists – like a worship song or something like that. Catholic Christians give us a good insight into this passage because they use this text on a regular basis not as a song, but as a prayer, that is known as "the Magnificat", which is the Latin word for the word "magnifies" or "glorifies." The word is found in the

opening phrase when Mary says, “My soul glorifies (or magnifies) the Lord.” **Approaching it as a prayer has some scriptural backing, too, because some of the themes in these verses are expressed in a prayer Hannah prays in the Old Testament, in 1 Samuel 2, in connection with her son, Samuel.** There are definitely parallels between what the two women say, and Mary was likely familiar with Hannah’s prayer and it may have been a bit of what inspired her in what she said.

So, let’s sing the rest of the passage...I mean, read the rest of the passage. **Luke 1:46-56.** From these words of Mary’s, there are some significant themes that are expressed. **First, in verses 48 to 50 we see three elements of the character of God: that he is faithful (also 54-55), mighty, and merciful.** Mary says, “He has been mindful of the humble state of his servant (faithful)...He has done great things for me (mighty)...His mercy extends to those who fear him” (merciful). If you’re familiar with Scripture, you know that it’s not as if Mary is the first to declare these attributes of God. We see them all over the Bible. But her words serve as a good reminder for us.

And let us remember, she’s declaring this even as life is challenging for her and her fellow Israelites. She’s engaged to be married, but now is pregnant out of wedlock. Matthew, in his account of the birth of Jesus, gives us a window into how this would impact her. He writes that Joseph, because of his religious conviction and adherence to Jewish morality and purity, thought about ending the engagement and calling off the marriage because of her pregnancy (Mt. 1:19). In other words: he initially presumed she’d been unfaithful. Then God gets a hold of him and sets him straight about what’s going on. But this is indicative of the kind of attitudes she – and he – would likely encounter throughout the pregnancy. But that doesn’t stop her from proclaiming God’s faithfulness, his might, or his mercy.

In addition to that, the nation of Israel is under foreign rule. They’re an occupied nation, as they’ve become part of the Roman Empire. So, it’s a culturally challenging time for the nation of Israel as well. Really difficult. And yet, even that doesn’t stop her from proclaiming God’s faithfulness, his might, or his mercy.

At the heart of her response to God’s activity in her life is a sense of peace and joy in trusting God’s promises, even when circumstances are uncertain. The words “peace” and “joy” don’t appear anywhere in what she says, but they permeate her words none-the-less. And this is because she trusts God. Mary’s proclamation about these attributes of God not only expresses an intellectual knowledge about God, but is a step of faith. She deeply trusts God. She’s living into what God is calling her to do, and she’s trusting God every step of the way. And so, she has this great sense of joy and peace because God is faithful, mighty, and merciful.

We also see here another aspect of God’s character: that he is on the side of not the proud and powerful and wealthy, but on the side of those who are humble and hungry. **Mary says, “He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty” (verses 51b-53).**

William Temple lived in England from 1881 to 1944, and served as a bishop and archbishop in three different locations in the Church of England (Anglican Church, essentially what we call the Episcopalian Church here). He said that this passage, and particularly these middle verses, could be seen as a dangerous text, especially in contexts of social or economic injustice. And so, he warned missionaries and others to be cautious when reading it in public because its themes challenge the status quo by advocating for the overthrow of the proud and the powerful and the uplifting of the humble and the hungry. In other words, he didn’t want missionaries reading this in public places in some far-off land for fear that the people in positions of power might think the missionaries had come to lead some kind of coup or rebellion and therefore the missionaries might put themselves in harm’s way.

This warning that he gave highlights the subversive implications of what Mary says. **Her words proclaim God’s action in reversing societal injustices and upending oppressive systems.** It’s a whole different outlook, a different mindset, about who and what matters in the kingdom of God, and that kingdom is to be demonstrated even here and now through Jesus’ disciples. Mary articulates for us here that God wants the humble and the

hungry to be lifted up and filled up, while the proud and the powerful and the wealthy are scattered, brought down, and sent away empty.

And I don't think there's any way we can just spiritualize this (though there are spiritual applications) while leaving real-life flesh and bones applications to the side. It's both spiritual as well as flesh and blood. Kind of like Jesus: God (spirit) come to us as a human (flesh and blood). The context in which Mary finds herself, as I said earlier and we probably all know but can't really identify with, is that Israel is humble and hungry. They are the ones who are being lorded over by the proud, the powerful, and the wealthy. It's not "when in Rome, do as the Romans do;" it's "Rome is here, so do as they do." And this has been Israel's struggle, for centuries before today's passage (Assyria and Babylonia ruled over them before the Romans), and even to this day. Just existing, having their own identity, has been difficult.

As Jesus always does, there is yet another component to this that even Mary would not have seen coming. **Some of the upsetting of the proud, powerful, and wealthy that he does in his ministry is not so much with Rome, but with the Jewish religious leaders of the day.** Jesus challenged the religious leaders of the day, calling out hypocrisy and abuse of power where he saw it in the Pharisees and scribes and others, while at the same time he ministered to those who were humble, who were hungry, who didn't have much in the way of position and power.

Now, the gospel, the good news of Jesus is for everyone – including the rich. There are well-off people and people in position of power who had positive interactions with Jesus, or even followed him (Zacchaeus, Levi, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea come to mind). But, the ones who usually think they don't have the inside track to a life of peace and joy are those on the margins of society...those who aren't in positions of power, who aren't wealthy, who don't have influence and sway in the world...Or it's those who are grieving, who are hurting, who are sick, who are brokenhearted. Jesus ministers to those people. He invites them to follow him.

Jesus speaks words of blessing and encouragement to people in these kinds of situations at the start of his Sermon on the Mount, in the section

known as the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12). “Blessed are those who...mourn, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are pure in heart...” and on he goes with labels we, or others, might put on ourselves or that we put on others...and are not usually associated with the movers and shakers of the world. Jesus wants to reach even them. It’s an upside-down gospel that he brings. It’s good news for everyone where peace and joy are not found in our stuff, wealth, or position in life, but are found in him, instead. And maybe that’s you this morning. Maybe you’re living on the margins in some aspect of life – emotionally, financially, relationally, physically – Jesus is with you in the midst of it and working to bring you through that. Or maybe you’re spiritually on the margins, as some sin has gotten a foothold in your life, and that is the oppressive force in your life that is ruling over you. God wants to set you free from that through Jesus as well. He is faithful, mighty, and merciful and he can bring you out from under the power of sin and darkness and bring you into his marvelous light. That’s the message of the cross and the empty tomb in particular.

So, God is faithful, mighty, and merciful. When we acknowledge our need for a savior and turn to Jesus who is “God our savior” as Mary says in verse 47, we can have peace and joy that finds its basis in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and be in relationship with God through faith in Jesus. **Jesus was born to lift us up, humble and hungry, into the very presence of God our Creator, here and now, and for eternity. He can do it because he is faithful, mighty, and merciful.**

We’re not particularly faithful, but Jesus is. We’re not particularly mighty, but Jesus is. We’re not particularly merciful, but Jesus is. And just as Mary exudes peace and joy in this passage: peace and joy can also be ours, knowing that God’s got us in the palms of his hands, in the midst of whatever we’re facing, both in this life and the life to come. And whether or not Mary sang these verses, this good news *is* certainly something worth singing about. So, rather than ending with a prayer this morning, let’s sing: Praise God from whom all blessings flow! Praise him all creatures here below! Praise him above ye heavenly host! Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost! Amen.