

Joy

Welcome to the third Sunday in Advent. During these 4 weeks of Advent, we prepare our hearts, minds and souls for the celebration of the coming of Christ this Christmas season.

During the first week we talked about Hope; last week we talked about love, and next week we will talk about Peace.

But today is Joy. For some reason I really enjoy the word “Joy.” It is just hard to think of bad things when you think of Joy.

According to Webster’s, the definition of the word joy is: Rejoice - feel happiness – or - the emotion of great happiness.

For some of us we can feel “Joy” when we have a child, or even a grandchild. Or maybe we feel “Joy” in our lives when we get a new job, or move to a new home, or when we attend church on “Potluck Sunday.”

There are many ways we can find Joy in our lives – but for the next few of minutes I want to share with you two different stories about two different people who were both told they were going to have Joy in their lives – they were told they were going to have babies.

One of them had been praying about it and really wanted one, and the other; well, let's just say it probably wasn't on the top of her mind at the time.

So the first story is about a guy named Zechariah. He's a priest at the Temple where people worshiped. It was his job this day to go into a sacred area of the Temple where only priests could go and to light the incense offering for God.

Now this was a very special time for him. There were many Priests, and for the most part, you may only get the honor of lighting the incense offering once in a lifetime – so it is a pretty special time – you had better get it right.

So as he is going into the sacred place to burn the incense, everyone else is outside praying. Some of the people might have been praying for forgiveness of their sins, others might be praying for help in their lives, while others yet may have been praying that Zechariah isn't going to be struck dead.

Yes, that is a fear. It is possible that Zechariah might not have prepared himself properly or might not have gone in with a good heart and he could be struck dead while in this sacred place.

So here goes Zechariah, stepping into the sacred area of the temple, and I am sure he was praying the whole time – but we really aren't concerned about his heart being in the right place. The Bible tells us that Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth lived wonderful lives, and they did everything the Lord commanded – without exception. They were good people.

The only problem with their lives is that they didn't have any kids. Now in their society it was believed that if you didn't have any kids that God was punishing you for something. For a woman not to have kids was shameful – a disgrace. But now Elizabeth and Zechariah were beyond their child-bearing years so that meant Zechariah wouldn't ever have any children.

So here is Zechariah, walking into the sacred part of the temple, again, only where priests could go – a once in a lifetime event – I am sure he was there going through the ritual of praying to God and making the incense offering exactly the way he was instructed to do – when all of a sudden – an angel appears out of nowhere and about scares Zechariah to death. The Bible tells us he was very startled and frightened.

Every time I read this part I picture the angel sneaking up behind Zechariah, tapping him on the shoulder and going, "Boo."

So Zechariah is very, very scared right now. This was his first time doing the ritual, and he probably started wondering if he did something wrong and now this angel was sent to kill him. None of the other priests ever talked about angels visiting them while they were in the temple. This was not a normal occurrence.

So the angel tells Zechariah, “Calm down, relax, I am not here to hurt you – I am here because God has heard your prayer.”

What do you think went through Zechariah’s mind right then...God has heard your prayer – which prayer??? Maybe it’s a prayer that I don’t really want to happen. I don’t know about you, but sometimes in our lives we can pray for some pretty interesting things. Maybe he prayed for something frivolous when he was a kid, like a little red tricycle, and the angel had come to bring it to him now that he was old.

Think about that for a moment - what would go through your mind if an angel told you directly that God has heard your prayer and that prayer is going to be answered?

Well, the angel didn’t keep Zechariah in suspense. The angel told him that his wife will give birth to a son named John - and John would bring joy into Zechariah’s life. Not only was she going to have a son, but this son would be considered a great prophet. At this time Israel hadn’t had any prophets for many years, and it was widely believed that when the next prophet came to Israel the Messiah, the Christ, wouldn’t be far behind.

The angel, whose name was Gabriel, also told Zechariah that his son would bring those who had turned away from their faith back to God. His son will be filled with the Holy Spirit, he will be an honest and just man, and he will prepare the way for the coming of the Christ.

You would think Zechariah would jump up and down screaming like someone who just found out he won the lottery. He had been praying that his wife would have a child for decades, and to find out that not only would he have a son, but one that would prepare the world for the coming of Christ. Wow – what an honor.

But joy wasn't his response. Now remember, Zechariah, is in the temple of God, all alone, people praying to God outside, and here appeared an angel to tell him this. One would think he was in the best place possible to hear God's word and be strong in his faith. Well, Zechariah looked the angel in the eye and basically said, "I don't believe you. My wife and I are too old to have kids."

- Just a word of advice - If an angel appears to you out of nowhere and tells you something is going to happen, even if it sounds improbable, just believe him. Don't call him a liar.

Here is what the angel said to Zechariah. “I am Gabriel. I stand before God. You know, the God you pray to all the time. Well, he sent me to tell you this good news – and you call me a liar. So here is what is going to happen: you won’t be able to speak a word until this child is born because you didn’t believe me, so this way you can’t tell anyone what really happened.” So when he should be shouting for joy, he can’t say a word.

Let’s shift gears and look at our other story that happened about 6 months later. The Bible tells us of someone else whom the Angel Gabriel visited. This time it’s a young girl – maybe 16 years old - living in a tiny little town called Nazareth. This girl was engaged to a man, but not married yet.

Gabriel comes to her and says, “Greetings Favored One! The Lord has blessed you and is with you.” Like Zechariah, she was startled, but not necessarily by the appearance of Gabriel, but by such a strange greeting. Here she was basically a child, living in a tiny town – why would an angel call her the Favored One?

She began pondering this right away. She was thinking, “What did I do – why is an angel greeting me in this fashion?” While Zechariah might have been thinking more about what he might have messed up in the incense offering.

But the angel says to this young lady, “Don’t be afraid, God has shown you his grace. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son. He will be great and called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of King David, his ancestor. He will rule over the people of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will never end.”

Now Zechariah and this young girl were both told that they would have a son. Zechariah pretty much told Gabriel he was a liar because his wife was old and it would never happen. But this young lady said to Gabriel, “How will this happen - since I am a virgin?” Being a virgin and getting pregnant is just as impossible as being too old and getting pregnant. But instead of not believing the angel, she simply asked how it would happen.

So the angel Gabriel said to the young virgin named Mary, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of God will cover you. For this reason your baby will be holy and called the Son of God and you will call him Jesus.”

And filled with grace Mary said to the angel Gabriel, “I am the servant of the Lord. Let this happen to me as you say.”

Now at first glance we would think, “Of course she would say that. What a blessing to be the mother of the Christ Child.” The Christ Child is the one that is supposed to bring salvation into the world. What a great blessing that would be.

Except we are forgetting something. If Mary becomes pregnant all of a sudden, we have a problem. Remember, she is engaged to a man named Joseph. *They haven't gotten to know each other yet* if you know what I mean. There was a day, not that long ago, that people actually waited until they were married to get to know each other.

So showing up pregnant would be bad. Actually, pretty disgraceful. In those days, she might have had to hide in disgrace inside her father's house for the rest of her life, she could have been banished from the land, or she could have even been put to death.

But that didn't bother her. She trusted God. An angel came and visited her and instead of saying, “no no, not me” she said, “I am the servant of the Lord. Let this happen to me as you say.” Even in the face of guaranteed ridicule and disgrace, she trusted God.

Whenever I read this, I try to apply it to my life and my relationship with God. As I pray and try to discern God's will and God's call for my life, do I sometimes doubt God's power like Zechariah, or am I completely faithful like Mary? Occasionally I have faith like Mary, but unfortunately, more times than not, you would call me Zechariah.

I have seen Mary's type of faith in many of you here. Some of you have shown it when you have known that God was calling you to do something special, or those of you that have put great faith and trust in God, even in the face of adversity. When I encounter people like that I say to myself, "They have the grace of Mary."

So to wrap up our story, Mary ends up going to visit Elizabeth who is Zechariah's wife.

An unborn child leaped for Joy because he heard Mary's voice when she came in. Elizabeth was joyous because the mother of the future Christ child came and visited her.

Right after this is when Mary sang her song of Joy – the song we call the Magnificat, which I read to you earlier.

And Zechariah, well, he got his voice back, shortly after his son was born, and named John – just like the angel said would happen.

We need to ask ourselves, what makes us jump or sing for Joy? Where do we put our Hope, our Trust, and our Love? Are we more like Zechariah and doubt God's power and love for us from time to time, or are we more like Mary and trust God fully with our hearts? Let's all try to have a little more Mary in us this Christmas season and let us all jump for joy for the celebration of Christ's birth.

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