

SERMON TITLE: "Spirit of Joy"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 1:39-56
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: December 23, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

During our Joys and Concerns prayers last week, I lifted up the good news that our son Oscar had just completed his high school credits. Many of you quickly understood why that was such a celebration for Steve and me. Others of you might not know enough about my family to understand what the fuss was about. Compared to the Carlsons' daughter Mallory earning a Master's degree in Math, why were we so happy about a mere high school graduation?

Well, let me tell you our story. In May 2005, my husband Steve and I traveled to the South American country of Colombia and adopted our two children. Angie had just recently turned 8. Her little brother Oscar was just shy of 7. Their early years of life had been traumatic, and they needed a family to love them.

At the time of the adoption, Steve and I believed deeply in the power of love. We were capable people with Christian faith and a middle-class American lifestyle. We figured that our loving care—along with church, a strong community, education, nutrition, medical care, a stable life, and plenty of prayer would cure whatever might ail those two little kids. But we soon realized that all was not well in paradise. We very quickly adapted our optimistic plan to include regular appointments with a Spanish-speaking psychologist. Within a few years, we added a doctor of psychiatry and mental health medications to the list of resources we relied upon for support.

But, even then, both kids continued to struggle in school, learning was very difficult, behavior was a constant problem, and soon, both Angie and Oscar were doing everything they could to avoid attending class at all. Angie began running away from home at the age of 12. Her reactive attachment disorder was on full display as she spent her teenage years defying every person and every institution that tried to help

her. Oscar did a little better, but he began sluffing regularly in his sophomore year of high school, went AWOL for weeks and months at a time, and ended up in the juvenile justice system. Later, he ended up in the adult justice system. All that interfered with his completion of high school, of course. So, for our 20-year old son to now finally complete his high school credits is a very big deal. That's certainly not to say that he's made a complete turn around and that there will only be smooth sailing ahead. But this development right now has us parents leaping for joy.

I know the circumstances are quite different, but maybe this feeling my husband and I are experiencing is, in some small way, something like the feelings of the characters in the Christmas story. If so, it's a good feeling. That's why I invite you this morning to delve into Luke 1:39-56 with me. Let's see if we can all experience this spirit of joy.

1—SPIRIT OF JOY IN BABY, ELIZABETH, AND MARY

The first sign of joy in these verses comes with the leaping baby inside Elizabeth's womb. It was his way of expressing something great and wonderful. Elizabeth's son, who would grow up to become John the Baptist, the prophet and forerunner of Jesus the Christ, was already—even before his birth—pointing the way to God's Son. Luke tells the story this way so that we, the readers, will truly believe that nothing is impossible with God. If a baby who isn't even born yet can know and communicate the gospel, that has to be a miracle from God, right? Surely this is a divine gift which inspires a spirit of joy.

Of course, this spirit of joy didn't just reside in the prenatal John the Baptist. The spirit of joy was also an experience and interpretation of John's mother Elizabeth. Now, six months or more along in her pregnancy, Elizabeth felt her baby kicking inside her. Instead of thinking of that kick as just a sign of her baby's physical development, Elizabeth attributed another meaning to this movement. To her, this big kick was her baby leaping for joy.

We must pause here and acknowledge that a pregnant woman isn't *necessarily* joyful. I don't think any woman who has gone through morning sickness would think of that as a joyous experience. Other

discomforts and serious problems can arise in pregnancy too. Infant and maternal mortality have been real concerns for people throughout the ages. Pregnancy has never been a piece of cake. A story in the Old Testament tells us about Rebekah, the mother of twins Jacob and Esau. During her pregnancy, the rival twins struggled so fiercely inside her body that their mother lamented: “If it is to be this way, why do I live?” (Gen. 25:22). Likewise, Elizabeth could have perceived her baby’s kick as painful, uncomfortable, dangerous, or an omen of troubled things to come.

But she didn’t. Maybe that’s because Elizabeth had wanted a child so badly. For years, she had hoped to become a mother, and yet was sadly barren. Luke 1:24 tells us that, for the first five months of her pregnancy, Elizabeth had remained in seclusion. This makes me wonder if she had had miscarriages before, that maybe she was being extra cautious this time. Maybe she was worried about catching a disease. Maybe she required bedrest. But, now, finally, this older woman had successfully carried a child into the sixth month. Things were looking hopeful. Surely this had to be a miracle from God. God was giving her a spirit of joy.

It’s important to note, however, that Elizabeth didn’t keep her joy to herself. As soon as she heard Mary enter her house and offer a greeting—Elizabeth felt her baby’s leap for joy, she interpreted it’s meaning, and she shared her joyful message with young Mary. Luke 1:42 tells us that Elizabeth “exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.’” Elizabeth referred to Mary as “the mother of my Lord.” Before Mary even had a chance to explain what had happened to her, the Holy Spirit had enabled Elizabeth to intuit the encouragement and affirmation the young Mary needed. Like a fountain, Elizabeth gushed out blessings upon her younger relative. Elizabeth even promised more blessings to come if Mary could believe that this message about her son would be fulfilled.

2—SHARING SPIRIT OF JOY IS ESSENTIAL

Elizabeth’s part in the Christmas story isn’t as well known as the roles of the angels, shepherds, and wise men. But I have to think that her spirit of joy was essential to the birthing of the messiah Jesus. Think

about it. What if young Mary had set out and gone with haste to tell Elizabeth about her visit by angel Gabriel, and Elizabeth had been in a sour mood? What if, in the swirl of pregnancy hormones, Elizabeth had only been able to think about her own sickness and discomfort? What if, instead of an effusive affirmation, Elizabeth had spoken words of blame, doubt, or discouragement? When Mary relayed her terrifying, exciting, and confusing experience of the angel Gabriel and his message about a divine conception, what if Elizabeth had questioned Mary's sanity, truthfulness, or purity?

I'm not saying that we must always only consider the positives and never the negatives. I'm not saying that we should only deal in hopes and dreams and never work through the real-life challenges and hindrances. I'm not saying that we should live in a magical world of unicorns and fairies and Christmas elves. I'm not saying that we should only trust and never be skeptical or suspicious. I'm not saying that we should only weigh the pros and never the cons. Not at all.

In fact, if you're getting to know me at all, you know that I'm pretty quick to zero in on what the problems might be in any given situation. I like to admire a rainbow as well as anyone, but I guess I'm just practical enough to know that you never get a beautiful rainbow without first having some rain.

Yet, what this story about Elizabeth and her baby reminds me is that there are times when it's more appropriate to admire the rainbow than to dwell on the rain. There are times when it's more beneficial to admire the silver lining than to concentrate on the dark cloud. There are times when it's best to enjoy the lemonade instead of harboring memories of the sour lemons. There are times when it's best to bless rather than curse. There are times when it's healthy and even necessary to allow ourselves to experience sheer gladness. And, without a doubt, there are times when it's essential for others that we share with them a super-abundant spirit of joy.

I remember one time when I was the pastor out in a small town in northeastern Colorado. I had been having a hard time with some people in my congregation. They were missing their beloved previous pastor, and they weren't happy that the bishop and the district superintendent had sent him somewhere

else and appointed me out there in his place. In addition, I was their first woman pastor, and those traditional ranchers and farmers didn't embrace newfangled ways very well. The situation was getting worse, so, one day I drove to Denver to talk with a middle-aged Catholic nun who did some spiritual guidance and counseling. She listened carefully to me for a while. When I finished summarizing to her what was going on in my congregation, and some of the things they were fussing about, she said, "Oh, is that all?! And I thought you were coming here with a serious problem!"

She wasn't dismissing me or denying my struggle, but she certainly lifted my burden. She helped me see that I wasn't the source of my congregation's grief. And, in the midst of my pain and confusion, she bolstered my ego and taught me some prayer skills to help me be more confident in both God and God's call upon my life. I'd be lying if I told you that everything got better immediately. In fact, I always felt like a fish out of water in that appointment. But, partly in thanks to that Catholic nun's spirit of light-hearted joy, I survived that rural ministry and eventually moved on to an appointment that was a lot more positive.

CONCLUSION

The story of young Mary hurrying to visit her relative Elizabeth has often been interpreted as two women happily confirming their insider, secret knowledge of God's miraculous plan. And there certainly is that element of celebratory joy in this story. But I suspect there was also no small amount of fear, concern, anxiety, and confusion—especially for Mary. Elizabeth, who was older and farther along in her pregnancy, and had already come a long way in her own understanding, was vital to this story. Not only would her baby John become the forerunner for Jesus, but Elizabeth herself was the one who was able to help Mary see the blessings that were to come. The spirit of joy that Elizabeth exuded obviously rubbed off on Mary, so that by verses 46 and following, Mary was able to sing, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

May it be so for us, as well. May we experience and share a spirit of joy!