

SERMON TITLE: "Leaping for Joy"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 1:39-56
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: December 22, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

On Wednesday morning, Donna Quiroga popped into my office with a plate of yummy Christmas cookies. Many of you don't have any idea who Donna is because she's been away from us for an entire year, receiving chemotherapy and radiation treatments for her cancer. Her past 12 months have been consumed by trips to the hospital, unpleasant side effects, and seclusion from the public in order to protect her fragile immune system. Even as Donna appeared in my office on Wednesday, with her newly-grown curly hair, she was wearing a facemask to keep herself safe. And, yet, in spite of all that, Donna was expressing joy that she had felt well enough to bake some cookies and deliver some holiday cheer to others.

Throughout this Advent season, we've been lighting the candles on the wreath and reading rituals about hope, peace, and love. Today's theme is joy—which is also expressed in our scripture reading from Luke, chapter one. There we see young Mary visiting her older relative Elizabeth, who was also carrying a child. Women of deep faith, they had a growing sense that the children in their wombs were going to play an important role in God's plan of salvation. The future of all people would be brighter because of the babies they were carrying. Their hopeful belief was so strong, in fact, that when Elizabeth's baby gave her a kick, she exclaimed that the child inside her was leaping for joy.

1—JOY FOR ELIZABETH AND MARY

There was much leaping for joy in the events leading up to that first Christmas. According to the Gospel of Luke, it all began with Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah. You see, Elizabeth and Zechariah weren't spring chickens anymore. They were getting up in years and had never been able to have a child. The word in those days was that Elizabeth was "barren," and her barrenness was cause for great

shame. But then, one day, when Zechariah was doing his priestly duties at the Jewish temple, the angel Gabriel appeared to him. Gabriel told Zechariah that they would indeed have a son, a son who would prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. The angel assured Zechariah that he and Elizabeth would have joy and gladness, and that many would rejoice at the birth of their son John.

Zechariah didn't jump for joy right away. Luke tells us that Zechariah's doubts were so great that he was struck mute. How could a child be born to them in their old age? But conception did occur, just as the angel had said, and Elizabeth couldn't deny the changes taking place in her body. Still, Zechariah's inability to speak and Elizabeth's seclusion kept the word from leaking about this unusual pregnancy. Mary only found out because the angel Gabriel told her. So when Mary arrived at Zechariah and Elizabeth's house, it was one more confirmation to Elizabeth that her own pregnancy was from God. Now Elizabeth could express her joy with someone who would understand.

This story reminds me of what one of my clergywomen colleagues told me about giving birth to her first child. That was some decades ago when clergywomen weren't very accepted by congregations. And then, to have a *pregnant* clergywoman, would be another shock to the congregation. So my colleague was worried about what her church members would think. Would they rejoice with her, or would they look upon her as unprofessional, now unable to do her job? Uncertain of the answer, this clergywoman kept her situation a secret as long as she could. She went out of town to a doctor so that no one would know. Then, when it was about to become obvious, she finally had to share the news with her congregation. She was relieved that, while some folks withheld their approval, the majority were very happy for their pastor and her husband. Congregation members volunteered babysitting and immediately signed up for the role of grandparents. They rejoiced at the birth of a new baby in their church family.

When God takes away shame and surrounds us with supportive community, there's much leaping for joy. That must have been how Mary felt, too, when she spent those months with Elizabeth.

That time gave Mary an opportunity to sort through her questions, so she could face the people back home. Who had ever heard of a virgin conceiving a child? No matter how sure Mary was that the angel Gabriel had told her that this child was from God, how would she explain it to her parents and to Joseph and to the town? She really needed the support of Elizabeth, who was going through an experience almost as strange. Together they could put aside their shame and rejoice in the wonders of what God was doing.

2—JOY FOR US AND OTHERS

Christmas can be a time of miraculously great joy for all of us. We may not be expecting a baby, but we can all claim baby Jesus as ours. The child of Mary, the divine Son, is a universal gift from God, one for whom we can all leap for joy.

Mary didn't expect to keep the joy of her son Jesus all to herself. That is evident in her beautiful song, the Magnificat, which begins in Luke 1:46. In that song, Mary magnified God for blessing her, a poor servant girl. She then went on to praise God for the ways in which God opposes the unfairly rich and the unjustly powerful. God, said Mary, is about the business of lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things. God offers mercy to all the descendants of Abraham. Mary believed that God's Son would continue this work. Mary's child would become the king and savior of the common people. That was the reason Elizabeth's baby was leaping for joy.

It has often been preached that Jesus' contemporaries misunderstood Jesus' purpose, in thinking that he was supposed to be a political king. But there's a sense in which we also misunderstand Jesus' purpose, if we think of him only as a spiritual savior. Certainly the joy of Jesus in our hearts is great; the spiritual benefits of sins forgiven are cause for unending celebration. But there is also this other--social, political, and economic--side of Jesus. Those who first rejoiced over Jesus did so because they believed that he would work to overthrow poverty and injustice. They believed that, as God's messianic king, Jesus would level the playing field. They leaped for joy at Jesus' birth because they

believed that, in his kingdom, the proud and haughty would be humbled and the lowly would be exalted so that opportunities would abound for all.

Today, we leap for joy at the birth of Jesus when we participate in ministries which work toward that same goal. We leap for joy when the necessities we put on the underwear Christmas tree are taken to the Lantern House and Youth Futures to help provide dignity to the homeless. We leap for joy that our Christmas milk donations will deliver nutrition to poor families in Guatemala. We leap for joy when we volunteer at the UMCOR Depot in Salt Lake City, helping the United Methodist Committee on Relief send school and birthing kits to families around the world and cleaning buckets to U.S. residents suffering from disastrous floods.

More examples come from our United Methodist Women, as they share earnings from their Craft Bazaar. Funds will go to five local mission programs: the YCC domestic violence shelter, the Family Counseling Center, the Ogden Rescue Mission, the Lantern House, and the Joyce Hansen Hall Food Bank at Catholic Community Services.

A few days ago, a thank you letter arrived at our church. It was addressed to our United Methodist Men, so I assume it was a result of the Sub for Santa gifts that you guys provided. Here's an excerpt from the letter:

Thank you for joining us in support of children and teens in foster care with your in-kind gift of presents for our Giving Tree program. By the time children are court-ordered into foster care, they have been hurt, abused, and neglected. They have survived the trauma, but it takes a physical, developmental, and emotional toll on the kids. Your support helps to provide a safe and loving home to each child in foster care so the healing may begin . . . Thanks to you, children in foster care have one more friend on their side.

From that statement, it's pretty obvious that our church's acts of compassion and kindness make an important impact. But the joy of our savior Jesus causes us to do more than acts of charity. Mary's song of joy indicates that structural change is needed, and that's why members of our church also participate in the Coalition of Religious Communities. That's why we go, at least once a year, to

Faith Day activities at the Utah capitol, to raise our voices in advocacy and urge our lawmakers to consider the needs of the poor in their legislation. Whenever we make the world a more equitable and fair place for all God's children, we are leaping for joy at Jesus' birth.

CONCLUSION

On Friday evening, I helped lead a service of remembrance at Leavitt's Mortuary. In attendance were family members and friends who had lost someone to death in the past 12 months. They came because they are finding Christmas difficult this year on account of their grieving hearts.

I know we don't always feel like leaping for joy. There are times when we're sad or sick or mad or worried. There are times when we need to cry or scream and let out our frustrations. At this solstice time of the year, it's easy for us to have the dark-days-of-winter blues that suppresses our activity. But our leaping for joy doesn't have to be dependent on our current state of mind or life situation. We leap for joy because Jesus was born to make the world a better place—and that *even* means lifting *us* up when *we* need it.

On our own, we may not be much better off than a couple of women wondering what to make of their strange pregnancies. But when we put together Elizabeth and Mary's insights that God is at work here—in and through them, in and through us, bringing new life and new hope for the salvation of the world—then how can we not join with Elizabeth's baby in leaping for joy?!