

SERMON TITLE: "Leaping for Joy"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 1:39-56
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: December 11, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

It's so great that we can have representatives from the George E. Wahlen Ogden Veterans Home here with us today! This is the first time since the COVID pandemic began that we've been able to have you back among us, and it feels good to be able to see you in person and share this joyous celebration.

During this Advent season, we've been lighting the candles on the wreath and reading rituals about hope, peace, and joy. Today's theme of joy is 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. This 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

Metaphorically speaking, there was much leaping for joy in the events leading up to that first Christmas. According to the earlier verses of Luke, chapter one, it all began with Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah. They 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 God's 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 to a doctor in another town so that no one in that small community 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, most were very happy for their pastor and her husband. Congregation members volunteered to babysit 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. Together they could put aside fear and experience joy.

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's 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 for 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, only concerned about whether or not we will go to heaven when we die. Certainly the spiritual benefits of sins forgiven are cause for unending celebration, and the assurance of eternal life offers us great joy. But there is also this other—social, political, and economic—side of Jesus and the salvation he has offered to the world. 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 everyone. Instead of exclusivity and hierarchy of privilege, the table of God's bounty would be open for all.

Today, we leap for joy at the birth of Jesus when we participate in ministries which work toward that same goal of balancing opportunities and resources so everyone has what they need. So often in our world, nations and governments become destabilized when the powerful hoard wealth and privilege for themselves at the expense of the weak and poor. When disparity increases between the haves and the have-nots, that's when conflicts, protests, and even wars break out. That's when military troops get involved, and that's when physical and emotional trauma exacts a terrible toll on soldiers as well as civilians.

Fortunately, we Christians have a better model that is spelled out right here in the story of Mary and Elizabeth, and not-yet-born Jesus and John the Baptist. As Elizabeth felt her child leaping for joy and Mary sang out her song of rejoicing, we too can experience our own joyful ways of giving birth to a more-positive future by allowing God's miraculous power to work in and through us. I know we don't think we have much ability to change the powers that be. But I doubt how Elizabeth and Mary thought they did either—until God came to them and increased their understanding. Then they began to see how their beliefs and actions would become part of God's much bigger plan of salvation.

The joy of this pre-Christmas message is that we don't have to allow situations in our nation and world to get so out of balance. As Christian believers and citizens in our society, we can do our part. How? you ask. Well, let's think of some examples from our life together here at First United Methodist Church.

Over just the past few months, many of us have participated in charitable ministries that have been a kind of leaping for joy. As evidenced in our worship service today, we have leaped for joy by raising and sharing dollars for the recreation fund at the George E. Wahlen Ogden Veterans Home. Since late October, we have also leaped for joy by providing shelter, transportation, household furnishings, prayers, and kindness to a refugee couple fleeing poverty and oppression in Cuba. As we are helping them, they are likewise imagining ways to help their family members who remain in that

country where hunger is rampant. We have leaped for joy by donating shoeboxes for Operation Christmas Child, Christmas Milk for kids in Guatemala, and Christmas gifts for Foster Care children here in Utah. Even this month, some of you have been leaping for joy by hanging boxers, briefs, panties, and socks on the church's underwear tree, to help provide some dignity to the homeless. Our United Women in Faith will soon be leaping for joy when they distribute the earnings from their Craft Fair to their 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. And, on Tuesday, some of us will be participating in a funeral and providing a meal for the grieving family of Shirley Valencia.

CONCLUSION

Do you see what I mean about leaping for joy by lifting up those who are in need of some compassion and assistance? A few days ago, a letter came to our church from the YCC. Margaret Rose, the Executive Director, wrote that some people contribute to the domestic violence shelter because they want a charitable tax benefit, others because they want to make a societal impact, and yet others because their own lives have been affected by domestic violence. She noted that these reasons for giving don't matter as much as the reality that we feel good when we give. And that fact—that helping others makes us feel good—is, what she called, “the brilliant fact of life that makes community work.”

So, I invite you to join with Mary and Elizabeth and other Christians in every time and place who want to experience the joy of caring for one another in our church, in our city, and in our world. When we offer a hand to lift up those who are down, when we support policies that expand opportunities, when we prevent conflict and violence by sharing resources, that's when we will feel joy in our hearts. That's when we, like Elizabeth's child, will be leaping for joy!