

TIME FOR JOY



Christmas is a time for joy. We are told to be joyful. We want to feel joy. We want to share joy with others. But joy can be hard to find sometimes. It isn't accidental. Joy is something to pursue and guard—to cultivate and value. God gives us the season of Christmas to interrupt our patterns and calendars. It is a time for more celebration and gathering with friends, to treasure family and to remember the birth of Jesus Christ—God's greatest gift of His own Son. Let's take time for joy.

TIME FOR JOY • LUKE 1:39-50 • Timothy McConnell • December 9, 2018

Now, I've never been pregnant. But I am an empathetic person, so it's *like* I've been pregnant. Right? No. I don't know a lot about being pregnant, as I demonstrated last week. But one thing I do know for certain is this: you are either pregnant or you're not. There is no "kind of" pregnant. And pregnant means there is something happening, something underway which is certain to come to fruition. Barring the unanticipated tragedy, a child is coming. A little bundle of joy. We have a number of babies arriving this month among our staff! It's so much fun. I don't know where that phrase comes from, "bundle of joy." I know there was a movie by that title, and of course it refers to the way a little baby is bundled up in blankets, and provides nothing but endless joy with no downside for the parents. But I wanted to use it in the title because it also makes me think of the gifts bundled up under the tree. It makes me feel like something has been prepared and is just waiting to be opened and fully enjoyed. Something is on the way and its arrival is certain—it's only a matter of time.

It's a unique picture, these two women rich with child, one too old to bear children and one too young to bear children, but both feeling within them the anticipation of what is about to happen; both knowing, somehow, supernaturally, that the children they are carrying are also already interacting; both believing, against all hope, that the children they carry are already playing a part in God's great story of redemption. God has started something. God has taken the initiative, by Word and by Spirit. God has begun something that is about to change everything. It is not a joyless revolution. Joy runs straight through it all.

I didn't mean to diminish the importance of lament last week. Psalms are filled with honest and open lament, grief is real and tears are necessary for healing. As my good friend, the Christian Counselor Eddie Capparucci says, "You have to feel to heal." You have to experience the hard feelings before you can heal your wounds, and avoidance is no road to health. The holidays can act like a dragnet through our emotional seas, pulling with them every bad experience we have had over the years. Thanksgiving is when we lost grandma; Christmas reminds me of losing my friend. These are real burdens. Maybe you entered this season and for the first time face Christmas without your spouse, or staring down a fatal disease. I don't want to minimize at all the importance of grief. I have friends, some in this church, who help people around the world through a ministry of lament—naming the hard things and broken places for the Lord with hope of healing. But listen now, lament is not a place to live;

it is a land to travel through with resolve. Love, Joy, Peace—these are the places God wants you to settle in and live. They are gifts God has already prepared and sent your way in Jesus. Bundles of joy, on the way to where you are.

Mary, being told by the angel Gabriel that Elizabeth was experiencing the same kind of thing she was, rushed to visit with her. Just a side note, when you are going through something, get with people going through something similar. Try to be around people God is working on in the ways He is working on you. Mary entered the home and called out to Elizabeth, then verse 41, "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." (Luke 1:41) Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God is doing something. The Spirit of God is getting involved. If you know the Christmas story (or if you don't, just look up the page a paragraph or two) you see how the Holy Spirit was already involved. God sent an angel to Mary to explain how she was going to carry Jesus: "But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.'" (Luke 1:30-31) And she said, What? Why? How? and "The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.'" (Luke 1:35) But maybe recognizing that this still did not fall easily into Mary's plausibility structures, Gabriel went on: "Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month." (Luke 1:36) Finally Gabriel punctuates it all with verse 37. Please underline verse 37: "For no word from God will ever fail." (Luke 1:37) Gabriel the angel, a messenger of God, a being who traffics in the word of God, says this: "no word from God will ever fail." God is up to something. God is doing something by Word and by Spirit.

Mary has the Spirit of God on her. Now Elizabeth receives the Spirit of God, and because God is present to her, because God is active in her, because God is at work in her heart and her mind changing what she thinks, altering what she believes, blowing her plausibility structures out of the water, making her believe that with God all things are possible, and that with God, no word from God will ever fail—because of, and grounded in all this, look at what Elizabeth can say, what she is able to say that she has never said before: "In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will

bear!" (Luke 1:42) It erupts out of her! She can see Mary has received something from God too. Mary has in fact received God's favor, God's grace (those words are tightly related) poured out over her just as the angel promised. Elizabeth knows, by the Spirit, that the child in Mary is special, unique, blessed. "But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43) Why am I favored? I don't deserve God's grace, love, attention, favor. Why does God love me when I know myself to be unlovable, unworthy? Does God's favor travel? Can it be shared? Now watch: "why am I so favored, that **the mother of my Lord** should come to me." That makes Elizabeth the first person on earth to call Jesus "Lord," and He hasn't even been born yet. How does she get there? Only by the power of the Spirit within her making her to believe the unbelievable and proclaim what is beyond knowledge. Elizabeth calls Jesus Lord. Mary, a few lines further, will cry out to God her Savior. Jesus is present, Lord and Savior. John (John the Baptist) is in Elizabeth's womb, and he starts dancing! "As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for **joy**." (Luke 1:44) John is dancing, and Elizabeth is dancing, and Mary is dancing, and I bet Jesus is dancing, and the ministry of the Lord and Savior, the great Redeemer and Revolutionary who is coming to set all things right, the ministry of Jesus begins with, you guessed it, "JOY!" Come on and dance, would you? Just a little jig?

Elizabeth finishes, "Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" (Luke 1:45) What kind of blessed do you mean, Elizabeth, we might ask. Mary has some hard knocks to endure yet. Mary has a hard conversation coming with her fiancé Joseph, or with her parents and other leaders in her life. Mary has a pregnancy to bear—a little too young and a little too pregnant. Mary has childbirth to endure (which was not in ideal conditions, if you remember). She has a son to watch grow and watch arrested, shamed, and violently killed. What kind of blessed is that, Elizabeth, in a world of grief? Well, her blessedness doesn't depend on those hardships. Her joy isn't grounded in her situation. So now we get Mary's response, Mary's song, the great Magnificat: "And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.'" (Luke 1:46-47 ESV) My soul magnifies. What does your soul magnify? Mary says, I'm not going to magnify the hardships, I'm not going to magnify how this situation actually makes things pretty hard for me. I'm not going to magnify the pain I have to endure. My soul magnifies the Lord! I will worship the Lord. And what is the effect of worship in her own spirit? "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior." I worship, my spirit rejoices. I magnify, praise,

honor, concentrate on, glorify God; my soul re-joices. Rejoice. Joy again and again. Joy on repeat. Re-Joy, see? "Repeat the sounding joy; repeat the sounding joy, repeat, repeat, the sounding joy." My soul magnifies the Lord; my spirit rejoices—it responds with joy.

And the Lord is worthy of praise. Carry on through the passage. What does it tell us about God? God is mindful. God is paying attention even when I thought He had forgotten me. I thought I was forgotten, but people are not going to call me forgotten, left behind, abandoned—no, "from now on all generations will call me blessed." (Luke 1:47). God is loving and God is paying attention. God is mighty, "for the Mighty One has done great things for me— holy is his name." (Luke 1:49) God is holy. He is good beyond what you can imagine good to be. God is merciful: "His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation." (Luke 1:50) Among human leaders we might say: mighty, moral and merciful...pick two. You'll never get all three. But God is mighty, God is good, moral, pure, holy, *and* God is merciful. He is worthy of praise. I can worship Him. In fact, my soul rejoices when I do. And this blessing does not end with me, says Mary, but this thing God is doing, this will be for every generation, down and down and down—right down to you and me, right here, December 9, 2018.

Where do you hope to harvest joy? Our tractor is out there reminding us that joy isn't something we buy or manufacture, it's something that grows from seeds that were sown down under the ground. It is a gift. It can be cultivated and hoped for, but we don't produce joy. God does. Where do you hope to harvest joy? What soil are you bent over waiting for joy to pop up and blossom? Jonathan Edwards in a Christmas sermon once said, "The great enquiry of the world in general in all ages of it, is after happiness. Yet there is scarce anything that the world is more deceived about. And thus therefore was no inconsiderable part of the errand of Jesus Christ, the great teacher of mankind, into the world, to instruct men wherein their true happiness consisted." He don't talk like us, I know. Edwards was saying, the great search of all the world in every age is to find happiness, but there is hardly anything out there we fail at more than finding happiness. If everybody wants happiness why are so few people happy? Because we stink at it. And we are deceived. And we run after the wrong stuff—and we lose track of the central truth of God. Joy is a gift. Love is a gift. Faith is a gift. Life itself...it is all gift. Before you give you must receive.

"Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would

fulfill his promises to her!" (Luke 1:45) Can you believe? Can you receive? This is such a great moment in scripture, in history. These two women dancing with babies in their bellies, just giddy at what God is about to do. Hey, come on! Dance like you're pregnant, would you? What a picture. Elizabeth old and pregnant. Mary young and pregnant. Both just clapping their hands in ecstasy, not at what they've done, but at what God has done. Where were they looking for joy? I don't know. But God has given them joy as a gift. God has interrupted. By Word and by Spirit God has taken the initiative, and right there in the dark days of Herod the Great, under the evil gloom of the Roman Empire, in the shadows of a corrupt religious systems and ugly economies where the bullies win and the evil are enriched and the poor and helpless are forgotten, God, by Word and by Spirit, has planted the seeds of the Kingdom of Heaven. God is on the move and anything is possible now.

It's a bundle of joy prepared, and on the way. It's going to happen. The fuse has already been lit. The orders have been given. It's only a matter of time. Ever ordered something online and tracked the package, you are so eager to see it arrive? The order is in. It's on the way. Blessed is Mary. But do you know what? Mary is a model, Mary is an archetype, everything God gave Mary is available to you, right now. God favored Mary, poured His grace out over her. God favors you and pours out His grace on you in Jesus Christ. God sent His Spirit to Mary; God pours out His Spirit on you to empower you to do and be all that God is calling you to do and be. Mary believed God by the help of the Holy Spirit. You can believe God, with His help. Later a woman stopped Jesus and cried out to Him, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you." He replied, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it." (Luke 11:27-28) Mary wasn't blessed because she bore Jesus' material body, because she cradled His body in her arms. She was blessed because she heard God's word and she believed it! And you can too. You can too. By word and Spirit, Christ comes to dwell in the heart of every believer. Elizabeth and Mary did know how to name Jesus Lord and Savior, it wasn't some great accomplishment or mastery in them—it was the Holy Spirit in them. And today the Holy Spirit is at work in you. Where are you looking for happiness? God has prepared joy and life eternal for you in Jesus Christ. Trust Him enough to receive. Don't magnify the misery; magnify the Lord, and rejoice.

STUDY GUIDE

TIME FOR JOY • A BUNDLE OF JOY

Luke 1:39-50

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word

Read Luke 1:39-50.

1. Elizabeth's baby is aware of Jesus's presence, even while in the womb! Think back on this past week. Were there moments when you noticed Christ's presence in your life? Describe these moments.
2. Re-read verse 45. Elizabeth declares that Mary is blessed because of her faith in the Lord's promise. When has it been easy or challenging for you to believe the Lord's promises to you?
3. Read these verses aloud: Luke 11:9-13, Hebrews 13:5, Joshua 1:9, Matthew 6:31-33, Romans 10:9-10, Proverbs 3:5-6, Philippians 4:6-7, Malachi 3:10, Psalm 9:9-10. These are a few of God's promises to His people. Which of these are easier or more difficult for you to believe? Why?
4. Read John 3:16-18. God has given us a promise in Jesus. God offers life to those who put their hope in Christ. How would believing this fully influence your day-to-day life? Are there changes you would make in your life?
5. Advent is a season of waiting and anticipation. However, it is not just anticipation for this Christmas, but for a future joy, when Christ's kingdom will be fully realized. Moving forward in this season, what can you do to actively seek joy in the promises of God?

IN: Connect with Each Other

Thank God for the faithful witness of Christians in ages past who believed God's promises and acted on that belief in ways which have influenced our faith today.

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

Throughout the fall, we've named people in our lives to whom we wanted to intentionally and faithfully represent Christ. Have you had any meaningful conversations with this person in the last few weeks?