

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 1:11–25 • Timothy McConnell • December 23, 2018

Joy is a resource that is undiminished by sharing. If I have a beautiful fruit cake, and I give you half, I have half as much fruit cake. Which would be fine, because I hate fruit cake. So let's get real. If I had a pound of fudge, and gave you half, I'd have a half-pound less fudge. That would make me sad. Most resources we have are like that. I have less because I give some away. Sharing my resources means diminishing my own stores. Giving most things costs you something. You're not aware of that right now, because you put Christmas on your credit card, but allow me to play Dave Ramsey with you for a minute and let you know—the bill is coming! Joy isn't like that. It is undiminished when given away. In fact, it's the opposite. Joy doubles when you give some away. Joy multiplies when it is shared. But do we know how to share the joy of the Gospel? Too often when we try to share what means the very most to us, with those who mean the very most to us, it just doesn't go very well. We either clam up, or we wish we would have. We either say nothing, shut our mouths and bite our tongues, hide what God is doing in our lives behind closed doors, in seclusion, or we say something we wish we hadn't. But joy is something to share, and today is the day to share it.

Here is the account of Zechariah the priest. We talked together about his wife Elizabeth two weeks ago, if you remember or you might listen back on the podcast or Roku or something. Now we get her husband, and we're a little out of order as far as the text goes, but today is the right day to talk about sharing the joy of Christ. Why? Because tomorrow First Pres expects to host over six thousand—a feast three times our normal fare—for services of worship to ring in Christmas. This is an opportunity God gives our church that not all churches get. I know churches that actually shrink at holidays. But God seems to pull all kinds of people our way, and it's a privilege. Tomorrow night (day and night) I'll be primarily speaking to people who don't know Jesus in a personal way, and trying to do some convincing, or at least opening the door just a crack to allow the light of Christ to enter. Be praying for that. But be inviting. We expect six thousand but we have room for eight thousand. Don't stop issuing the invitation. Tomorrow could be a night when many come to faith in Christ. Of course, it won't be you or me doing that—that only happens by the Spirit of God. But we can play a part, if we don't let our mouths get stuck shut.

Zechariah was a priest, descended from a long line of priests. Priests were separated into divisions. You

have to understand, the Temple in Jerusalem was the center of religious activity, the heart of the relationship between the people and God, and the main activity was sacrifice. Being a priest in the Temple was almost like being a butcher, the amount of processing of sacrificial animals, birds, and also grains and incense and all of it—it was non-stop physical work. So priest divisions came in on weekly shifts. It was Zechariah's shift. He was processing a burnt offering of incense. The people were outside waiting to see the smoke, smell the fragrance, and be encouraged that their relationship with God was still there. God was still there. God still knew them. But here's Zechariah bent over metal and flint, just trying to get the darn fire started! (I think pastors and ministry leaders can relate a little). And that's when the angel appeared. Side story: there has been a full-sized cardboard cutout of me floating around the church staff this year. A few weeks ago, someone put it in my bathroom in my office. I went in there on a Sunday morning at about 6:30 a.m., in the dark, trying to get ready to be a good pastor and take care of all you people! I just about jumped out of my shoes. I pretended they didn't get me, but they got me. Zechariah, it says, "was startled and gripped with fear." Yeah.

We know Zechariah was a good man because the Bible tells us he was. It says of Elizabeth and Zechariah, "Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly" (Luke 1:6). But admirable people don't always perform admirably. Zechariah is just a man. He's imperfect. If God is going to use him, He's going to have to use him as an imperfect man. So here's the first point of application: **God will bring His perfect ends even through imperfect people.** Gabriel addresses Zechariah, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John" (Luke 1:13). I always find myself wanting to insert long pauses when Gabriel is talking. "Do not be afraid, your prayer has been heard." Long pause. Zechariah must have been thinking, what prayer? See, they were long past having kids. Like Abraham and Sarah in Genesis. "Your wife," long pause. "Elizabeth!" Oh yeah. "Will bear you a son." Long pause. "But...we're old. We sold the crib. I don't have a car seat..." More seriously, we have a lot to learn here. Gabriel tells Zechariah his prayers have been answered. I'm guessing he can't even remember the last time he prayed for this. A child? Those prayers went up long ago. They were real at the time. They were passionate at the time. But they were long past any hope. You have to wonder what the last time was

Zechariah prayed for a son before Gabriel showed up. Twenty years? Thirty? How long have you been praying your heart's desire? Here's a second point: **We never know when God will answer our prayers, or how.**

"You are to call him John." That would bring on a long pause. Zechariah was a good name. It was a noble name. There are almost thirty Zechariah's in the Bible. People obviously loved and respected the name. If you had any excuse to name your kid Zechariah, you'd go for it. So the name was a big deal. This is not a small thing. It comes up again after the child is born, and the people can't believe they aren't naming the boy Zechariah. Here's a third point: **When you pray, and when God answers, are you willing to let go of your agenda and trust God?** Gabriel goes on to outline the power and ministry of this child, which is John the Baptist, who is going to move out over the landscape like Elijah under the power of the Spirit setting the path straight to prepare the way for Jesus. But I want us to stick with Zechariah this morning. The angel said to Zechariah, "He will be a joy and delight to you." Long have you prayed. Long have you wanted and desired this. Long have you given up hope that God would respond at all. Today those prayers are being answered. It will be a joy to you. But look now, joy isn't just for one. This is a deeply personal thing, a thing between Zechariah and Elizabeth and God, an intimate thing, and intimate space God is moving into here to fulfill and to bless. But Gabriel says, this joy isn't just for one, or for two, "He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth" (Luke 1:14). Joy multiplies when it is shared. Joy in God is joy to share.

Zechariah stumbles on that point right there. Can we peer into this guy's psyche a little? It's just guessing, it's biblical imagination, but here's a respected leader in the closing chapters of his influence. Do you think his reputation means something to him? You bet it does. Do you think Zechariah would want to present half-baked information to the people who follow and respect him? Do you think he'd be worried about his reputation if he went out and told the crowd he and Elizabeth were "expecting"? Verse 18: "Zechariah asked the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years'" (Luke 1:18). Not "How can I believe this," or "Help me have faith in this," but "How can I be sure? How can I be certain? How can I know and prove and verify what you have said?" One more point of application: **If you are going to be open to talking about Jesus and sharing His joy with others, you are going to have**

to risk not knowing everything about everything all the time.

Gabriel shuts his mouth. Boy, who knows? Maybe Zechariah had already been thinking about the glory and fame punctuating the end of his career when he would walk out of there and tell the crowd, "Guess who I was just hanging out with, just him and me, by the incense altar!" But he has to mime his way along. His moment of prideful fame turned into a moment of humbling shame. He and Elizabeth hid. For five months they hid. Him unable to speak, her watching her belly grow. But sweetly she reminded him day after day that God was up to something here. "After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. 'The Lord has done this for me,' she said. 'In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people'" (Luke 1:24-25).

Will you share the joy of Christ with someone today? What keeps you from it? Are you like Zechariah, worried that your reputation is in jeopardy if you show those around you the joy you have in Christ? Are you like Elizabeth, preferring to stay behind closed doors while God's purposes and blessings are growing in your life? Why? Joy in Christ is joy to share. It's selfishness that makes us hide it. It's self-focus that keeps us from opening up. Self-obsession shrinks life while focus on others grows it. When we are so focused on our own, interior life, there is no room for others. But when we open up our hearts to others, the whole deal grows. That's why we push people toward Life Groups. We have to break out of our isolation and individualism and learn to share what God is doing in our lives, even when we don't fully understand it ourselves. We should be a people postured to share joy, always ready to share something wonderful of God. Willing, poised to point out the endless horizons of faith in Christ, the open space and vibrant colors of life in Christ. Ready to share the joy of the Lord we have come to know by grace. That's us.

Maybe you are on the edge, thinking about a neighbor or a relative or someone you've been considering inviting tomorrow. Uh...do it. Joy in Christ is joy to share. Maybe you are wondering if you are going to push the issue with family, maybe you're the patriarch, the matriarch, and you know if it wasn't for you forcing the issue the family would skip church, just stay home and watch Elf or something. Force the issue. Don't get dumbstruck. Press in. That's the application. Share the joy. Share the joy you know in Jesus Christ. Look, they need it. Share the joy as joy. Don't share a guilt

trip or a burden or a religious obligation. Share the joy of what God is doing in your life. And remember, it isn't church they need; it's Jesus they need. Don't make it about church, don't show them First Pres. Show them Jesus. Invite them in one way or another into the back chamber where God showed up in your life, next to the table of incense, back in the quiet and private room, when God opened your heart to things you thought were impossible. Take them back into the room where Elizabeth is hiding. Show them what God is doing in your life, what God is growing in your life. Does that make any sense? I can't tell you what to say, see, because I don't know what God is growing in your life particularly. But I know if you are in Christ, He is up to something. Share it. Share how it gives you joy. Open up, take the risk, humble yourself. Share Christ.

Why? The people need it. Even when they say they don't. Once Zechariah's mouth opened again, he shared a song. Like Mary's Song. He sings of the good news, the message his son John is going to share, and as he does we see just what the people desperately need to hear from God: "And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace" (Luke 1:76-79). Share the joy of Christ—it's what they need. Knowledge of salvation. Forgiveness of sins. Tender mercy of God. A rising sun to shine on those in darkness. Freedom from the shadow of death. A path ahead of peace and wholeness and life. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). There isn't a person on this planet who doesn't need that light. It isn't church they need. It isn't First Pres or Pastor Tim they need. It isn't a perfect family Christmas they need or a perfect picture in front of a tractor...who needs that? In the end, we share the joy we find in God because it's Jesus they need. I can't live without Him. You can't. They can't. The joy we have in Him is joy to share.

STUDY GUIDE
TIME FOR JOY • JOY TO SHARE
Luke 1:11-25

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word

Read aloud the passage for the week: Luke 1:11-25. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Underline or note any words or phrases that seem meaningful.

1. What does this passage reveal about God's character?
2. What does this passage indicate about God's redemptive plan?
3. Re-read verse 14. The birth of a child is a cause for communal celebration. Describe a time in your life when you experienced joy as part of a community.
4. Zechariah was unable to speak until John's birth, and Elizabeth spent five months in seclusion. They were unable to share their joy with others. What keeps you from sharing the joy you have in the Lord with others?

IN: Connect with Each Other

How could you share the joy of the Lord with others in the coming week?

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

It's Christmas! Consider hosting a party for family or friends to celebrate the birth of Jesus together with food, games, singing, etc.!