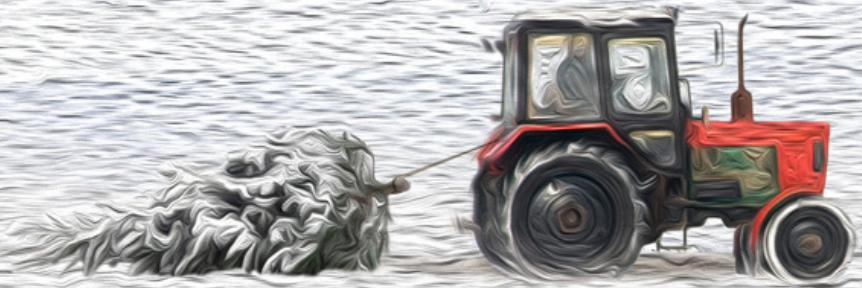


TIME FOR JOY



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 1:68–79 • Jennifer Holz • December 30, 2018

Well, Christmas is almost a week behind us, and now we make the turn to the New Year. We begin to re-orient ourselves to what is to come in 2019. This in-between time (between Christmas and New Year's) is an interesting time. We have this week to recover from all the intense celebration of Christmas, and a few moments to recalibrate ourselves to a New Year beginning. Maybe. With kids on break, many of you are still managing a chaotic household: detoxing from sugar and presents, and perhaps lots of guests or visitors. And some of you still have another week to figure out vacation routines before kids go back to school. But tomorrow night, our calendars change to a New Year. The old will be gone, the new arrives. Whether we are ready or not.

We've had a marvelous month of joy in our church, but perhaps the next question is already coming to mind: *does our Time for Joy last into another season? Can we carry it with us into a New Year?* I hope so! Today we hear Zechariah's song. It's a joyful song that bursts forth after nine months of silence. You may not have gotten nine minutes of silence in the past week, but today we get some remarkable words from a remarkable man who has had to store up his joy in his heart because his voice has been on mute.

Tim shared the story last week about the priest Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, who is told by an angel that in their old age, he and Elizabeth will have a son. God faithfully keeps His promises, but Zechariah asks for a sign—*how can I be sure of this?* And the angel says, *because you did not believe my words (which will come true in their appointed time), you will be silent and unable to speak until the day this happens.* And Zechariah's mouth is shut for nine months.

Only after the baby is born and the child is named, does his voice return. **"He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, 'His name is John.' Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God"** (Luke 1:63-64). Finally, Zechariah gets to give voice to his joy. I'm sure in that moment, for those who were near him, hearing him speak was an amazing sound.

The Sound of Joy

I was thinking over the past month about the sounds of this season, sounds that remind us that Christmas has come. *What does joy sound like?* I thought it would be fun to remember a few movie moments that radiate joy.

There is Ebenezer Scrooge, who, in his moment of transformation, opens his window to find out what day it is. And discovering that he hasn't missed Christmas day, yells to a boy below to go buy the big Christmas goose down the road and send it to Bob Cratchit. Scrooge's joy is loud and full of laughter as he strolls down the street wishing everyone a Merry Christmas. 'Bah humbug' turns to 'Merry Christmas' and a stingy spirit becomes a generous spirit. Joy is a merry heart and the sound of a healed humanity.

Then there is the Grinch, who spends most of the story mumbling and moaning. But in a moment of heart-felt discovery, the Grinch finds out that Christmas isn't after all about packages, boxes and bags, but about the spirit of joy and the love of a town for one another. What does joy sound like to the

Grinch? It sounds like the breaking of a box that holds the Grinch's tiny heart as it bursts open and grows three sizes. Joy is a heart expanding with love.

For Buddy the Elf, Christmas joy is about singing. *And you can sing, you know. It's just like talking but you move your voice around.* We learn about the elf code: *The best way to spread Christmas cheer, is singing loud for all to hear.* Joy is singing.

And we must say a word about the Hallmark Channel here, because 82 million viewers can't be wrong. I don't really need to pick out just one movie, because for Hallmark joy is a very simple formula: Girl is hopelessly stuck in her life without love. She's very busy. She's caring for everyone else's needs. Eventually she gets dumped by her current boyfriend who is clearly not a good fit, and usually not a very deep human being. Only to be discovered by good guy on the margins who's been overlooked because he isn't quite pretty enough, or polished enough or 'fill in the blank.' Girl is swept off her feet and a marriage proposal along with seasonal joy follows as the credits roll. Cue sappy Christmas song sung by famous country singer. Joy is the sound of romantic love.

But what does joy sound like for you at this time of year? Perhaps for you it's the sounds of children on Christmas morning. Maybe it's a favorite Christmas hymn being sung by a choir, or the voice of a loved one on the phone wishing you a Merry Christmas.

In our story today, joy has a very specific sound. Zechariah's mouth is opened and out spills an entire history of joy. Joy reveals itself in the sounds of praise of God. **"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people"** (Luke 1:68). For Zechariah, joy is a promise fulfilled, a look into the past to remember what God has said, and a shout that God has done what he said he would do.

And in the pattern of those who have gone before him: Abraham, Moses, Solomon and David, Zechariah adds his song. Raymond Brown refers to Zechariah's song as "a mosaic" of Old Testament phrases and ideas. Listen to these voices of praise from his past, voices who have helped shape Zechariah's own song.

Solomon – "Praise be to the LORD God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds" (Psalm 72:18).

David – "Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting" (Psalm 41:13).

Solomon – "Praise be to the LORD, who has given rest to his people Israel just as he promised. Not one word has failed of all the good promises he gave through his servant Moses" (1 Kings 8:56).

Moses – "The LORD is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him" (Exodus 15:2).

Miriam – "Sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea" (Exodus 15:21).

Zechariah sings about the past and the present coming together—the past promises of God now being fulfilled in

Jesus: God has come to redeem His people. God has raised up a horn of salvation. Zechariah references Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Micah, the Psalms, Samuel. *Joy to the past, the Lord has come.* Zechariah knows the history of God's people. He knows the promises of God that have been made throughout the generations, and He has connected all the dots. Christ has come to save.

We've been crawling all over our joy tractor this past month, talking about the reality that joy is cultivated over time. Today, Zechariah gives us a glimpse into one of the ways joy is cultivated in our lives: remembering the past and cataloging all the places God has met us in the years gone by.

The Gift of Silence

But let's pause here for a moment, because we've got to talk some more about Zechariah's gigantic time out: nine months of silence. In fact, let's be quiet for a moment so we can just remember how silence feels.

Can you imagine not being able to speak for nine months? That's a long time. Think about it. Or can you imagine living with someone who couldn't speak for nine months. (Actually, don't answer that.)

Zechariah's voice has been his vocation. He speaks to the people on behalf of the Lord and speaks to the Lord on behalf of the people. Communication has been an important part of his calling. And now stillness, silence. Elizabeth is experiencing perhaps the greatest joy of her life, the joy of a baby growing inside. Zechariah can only write notes to her on a writing tablet. No wonder God sends her cousin, Mary, to see her—she needs some adult conversation!

For some of you this morning—I'm guessing, nine months of silence would be a total gift: no expectation that you had to say anything to anyone. You wouldn't have to find the right words, or try to be clever or funny. Best. Gift. Ever. For others, this would be a nightmare. You mean I can't express myself verbally for nine months? Are you kidding? Worst. Gift. Ever.

Surprisingly, in Scripture, nine months of quiet might not actually be that long. If you open your Bible and find the page in between the Old and New Testament, I want you to realize that while it only takes a moment to flip from Malachi to Matthew, there is actually a significant time gap between these two writers. It is a gap of silence. From the final words of Malachi to the first words of Matthew, about 400 years has passed. No prophet, no messenger to speak to God's people. 400 years of silence from God.

That's a long time. Multiple generations have come and gone in that time. They have had to hold on to the Scriptures that have been given. And wait. But God is God of Word. God is a God who speaks. The silence is not to last forever. Out of that long silence, Zechariah is the first to learn that God is about to speak again. His son, John, will be the messenger who prepares the way for God's final word, Jesus. Zechariah struggles to believe, and the angel gives him a nine-month time out to think about it.

A few years ago, my husband gave me this award winning book, *QUIET: the power of introverts in a world that can't stop talking* (author, Susan Cain). The author writes about a cultural

shift that began to happen in the 1920's, the emergence of a concept called "personality." Americans began to receive advice on self-presentation. Before this time, the character attributes that were valued in society were those that anyone could work on: citizenship, duty, work, golden deeds, honor, reputation, morals, manners, integrity. But in the 20's, the valued character attributes began to shift to something that quiet people (introverts) would have a harder time grabbing onto. Strive to be—magnetic, fascinating, stunning, attractive, glowing, dominant, forceful, energetic. Now her point is not to put down extroverts, but to help us notice that there are some things that are forged in the quiet, inner places of our lives that are supremely important that have perhaps gotten lost. As a culture, we have made a virtue out of living as extroverts often at the expense of our ability to value the inner journey, the quiet center of our lives. "Love is essential," she writes. "Gregariousness is optional." Love is forged in the quiet, inner places of all of our lives. Now, while the author doesn't connect to the Christian journey, her point is loud and clear: there are profound gifts to be found in the quiet, in the silence of our lives.

Sometimes life is noisy. There are so many voices surrounding us, so many communication loops, so much going on. It's difficult to pull away and quiet the noise. But even Jesus needed quiet. We read that he "often withdrew to lonely places to pray" (Luke 5:16).

My daughter was recently given a new retainer for her top teeth because the dentist determined that he needed to help make more space in her upper jaw for her adult teeth to come in. The retainer came with a little key. And each week, she has to turn the key in her retainer to expand it to make space. It isn't very comfortable, but she is faithfully doing what is required of her and, hopefully, her teeth will come in beautifully. It's not always comfortable to make space in our lives for quiet, for reflection, for meditating on the promises of God. But like the key, the Word of God guides us and the Spirit of God fills us, and the praise of God grows quietly in our lives while joy begins to overflow.

Perhaps we each can find a moment between now and tomorrow night, to stop, to take a breath, and to listen to the Lord. Let God show you the past year, (the bigger picture)...and how he has met you.

Speaking Joy to the Next Generation

Tim mentioned last week that we have had a little baby boom on our staff. There is lots of new life around here. We've been sharing baby pictures, and baby stories, and we had to move to a lottery system to see who would get to play baby Jesus last Monday at the Christmas Eve service. Okay—not really, but my goodness!

The first part of Zechariah's song is sung to God; the second verse is sung to his new baby. His words to baby John are full of promise and purpose. *This is who God has made you to be, John. Prophet of the most high. Preparer of the way. So that the people will know the forgiveness and mercy of the Lord.*

Zechariah's song is not finished until he sings a blessing over his son: a father blessing a son, a sign that God is near. Our history is littered with stories of strife, enmity and the absence

of fathers in the lives of their sons. But the prophet Malachi tells us at the close of the Old Testament, that a signal of God's coming is this: the hearts of fathers will be turned toward their children. A father blesses his son in the first chapter of Luke—God is on his way.

Baby John, in this moment, would not be able to comprehend this gift of words from his father. However, in an oral culture, these words would be remembered and told to him over and over as he grew up. Zechariah and Elizabeth were old, they would probably not live to see their son grow up, but John would know without a doubt who God had made him to be, who he was in the story of redemption, and what Jesus had come to do. His father had spoken a blessing over him.

In this moment, Zechariah also gives us an elevated picture of the next generation reminding us that they will be the ones to carry the truth about the Messiah to their peers and the generations after them. They will be the ones sharing the good news of Jesus' forgiveness, the tender mercy of God, the knowledge of salvation, and how the light of Christ scatters the deep darkness and shows us the way to peace.

Last Monday on Christmas Eve, we worshipped together with almost 6,000 people. It was an amazing night of praise to God for sending Jesus. There were so many children that were here throughout the day, and I found myself watching them all day long. I think my favorite moments were watching parents guiding their little ones to lift their candles during "Silent Night." My three year-old niece fell asleep on her dad's lap at some point during the service, and my brother-in-law woke her up during the candle lighting so she could lift her light. She gave him this look of "are you kidding me?" and went right back to sleep! It was precious. But there is something God has planted within us about passing on to the next generation the importance of lifting the light of Christ. My brother-in-law's impulse was to teach his young daughter that she was made to lift the light of Christ.

Here's the thing. It's kind of a cultural marker in society to complain about the next generation, to communicate about them with disdain, to be cynical, critical and to speak down to them. Sometimes we all need a little "time out" to recalibrate our hearts and souls and to remember that we are to pass on the gifts of life to the young ones in our midst. Praise of God is not complete until God is celebrated with the next generation. Joy to the past becomes joy for the future.

Before the clock strikes midnight tomorrow night, can you find a moment to be quiet before the Lord—to thank him for your year and then to pass on to a young one the rich blessing of our God who is faithful in the past, present and future?

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and redeemed his people" (Luke 1:68).

Amen.

STUDY GUIDE

TIME FOR JOY • JOY TO THE PAST

Luke 1:68–79

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word

Read Luke 1:68–79.

1. What does this passage have to say about God's redemptive plan?
2. Zechariah recounts God's faithfulness to Israel since the days of Abraham, David, and the time of the prophets. When you think back on 2018, where do you see evidence of God's faithfulness?
3. When you think back on years gone by, where do you see evidence of God's faithfulness throughout your life?
4. Gratitude is a key to unlocking joy. Have you been able to practice gratitude this past month? What effect has this (either intentionally practicing or not practicing) had on you?
5. Zechariah describes how John (the Baptist) will go on to prepare the way of the Lord, to declare salvation and the forgiveness of sins. In many ways the church shares in this vocation. What would it look like for you to "prepare the way of the Lord" in your areas of influence?

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

Re-read verse 79. First Pres's mission is to be "light and life for the city." How can we participate in God's work of bringing light to dark places as a community (either as individuals or as an entire church)?

IN: Connect with Each Other

What are you looking forward to in 2019? What looms ahead that makes you anxious? Lift all of these things up to the Lord.