

December 10th, 2023

Luke 1:24-45 “We Find Joy in Connection”

The theme for our Advent season this year is, “How Does a Weary World Rejoice?” Each week we’re going to address this question and as I mentioned last week, sometimes we’ll address it with more questions. Advent isn’t a time for platitudes and pat answers. It’s a time to think and reflect. Last week we talked about how weariness creeps into our lives and how important it is to acknowledge it. The sermon title was, “We Acknowledge Our Weariness.” How does a weary world rejoice? We acknowledge our weariness. This week, the sermon is, “We Find Joy in Connection.” How does a weary world rejoice? We find joy in connection. I don’t know pastor. This sure *sounds* like a pat answer. And if the answer is always in the sermon title, why bother preaching? Okay. I hear you. But I still want to give you some questions to think about this week so that you can at least reflect on what it means to *find* connection.

Last week we were introduced to a temple priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. They had been trying unsuccessfully for years to have a child. After they reached a point that most people consider beyond childbearing age, the Angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and brought him good news. Elizabeth was pregnant and she was going to have a special child who they would name John. John’s purpose would be to bring people to God and prepare the way for the Messiah. Zechariah’s response was less than enthusiastic. Weary even. He said, “How will I know that this is true?” Because Zechariah couldn’t bring himself to believe the good news, Gabriel silenced him.

This week, we are introduced to Elizabeth’s cousin Mary, a young woman from the Galilee region who lived in a town called Nazareth. She was engaged to a carpenter named Joseph who was from the House of David, Israel’s greatest king. The angel Gabriel visited Mary and told her that she was pregnant too and that she would give birth to the Son of God. Mary, a virgin, said, “How’s that going to work? I’m a virgin.”

Zechariah's response to Gabriel's news about Elizabeth was, "How will I know this is true?" Mary's response was, "How is this going to happen?"

She didn't doubt the message, she just wanted to know how it was all going to take place. Gabriel then told Mary that it would be through the work of the Holy Spirit. For good measure Gabriel addressed her concern about how this is possible by saying, "Your cousin Elizabeth who is beyond child-bearing years is going to give birth to a special son too. Anything is possible with God."

Mary then traveled down to Judea to share her good news with Elizabeth. When Elizabeth greeted Mary, her baby kicked so hard that she was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And *blessed is she who believed* that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." This is where we can pause and talk about connection.

Here are two pregnant women getting together to share their experiences with one another. They're just chatting and hanging out. Two pregnant women, who are related yet different from one another. One is young and one is old. One is married and one is not yet married. One is carrying the Messiah and one is carrying the one who will prepare the way for the Messiah. They received the news of God's plans for their lives at different times and places. But it's when they are connected that they experience *shared* joy. It's when they come out of their isolation that joy becomes the connection. If comfort is a necessity in this weary world, then we've got a great example here about how joy can be found in the company of others. Mary and Elizabeth show us how comfort and joy can happen through connecting.

Now ... here are the questions I want you to consider this week –

Author and researcher Dr. Brené Brown in her book *Atlas of the Heart* defines joy as “an intense feeling of deep spiritual connection, pleasure, and appreciation.” She says joy is “characterized by a connection with others, or with God, nature, or the universe.” I believe what she’s saying here is that connection is fundamental to the experience of joy. So I’d like you to consider a time when you’ve experienced deep joy. Who or what did you feel connected to? When have you experienced the kind of contagious joy that would cause you to drop everything to share it with someone like Mary did with Elizabeth?

When the angel Gabriel visits Mary, his first word is, “rejoice!” Why do you suppose Mary is so skeptical of the angel’s joyful greeting at first? When have you been skeptical of an expression of joy, and why? Does joy require vulnerability? Why is it so easy for us to be skeptical but hard for us to be vulnerable?

Mary and Elizabeth’s stories remind us that we don’t have to face life’s difficulties on our own. These women had vastly different experiences and vastly different reactions to their good news. Elizabeth isolated herself for five months. I get that. That’s what I tend to do when I’m facing difficulties. But Mary had the opposite reaction. She made a point to seek out her cousin. In fact, she traveled a great distance to see Elizabeth. That tells me that Mary believed in the power of connection. What allows us to build connections even when our experiences and our reactions to life’s difficulties are vastly different? And how can the church be a safe place where we can be vulnerable and where those connections can be made?

My hope for us in this community of faith is that we re-discover the importance of connectivity. Good things happen when we connect. Gary and Amber have been putting their heads together to have a monthly Saturday afternoon game day where we can connect over table games. It’s amazing how much you can learn about a person when you’re playing Monopoly or Uno or cards or Dungeons and Dragons. Think about what it felt like when we first came together after being holed up

for a year and a half during the pandemic. In some ways it took us a while to get used to. Yes, we did our best to try to stay connected as a church by having our Tuesday online check-in. Sometimes we played games. Sometimes we asked questions. Sometimes we just talked about what was going on in our lives and how we were dealing with the challenges of being cooped up in our homes. But we all knew something was missing, and we rejoiced when we were finally able to connect in person. How does a weary world rejoice? We find joy in that kind of connection. My prayer for us during this Advent season is that in finding connections with each other, we will also find ways to connect with God together.