

Title: The Promise - Joy
Date: December 12, 2021
Subject: Zechariah shows us the joy of preparation for the Christ of Christmas.
Scripture: Luke 1:8–20, 57–66; Isaiah 40:3–5

The story is told of a man who joined a monastery. He had to take a vow of silence and would only be allowed to speak two words a year on the anniversary of joining. The first anniversary date came. The newbie appeared before the leaders who asked him what he'd like to say. "Food bad." Then he went back to his duties. Another year rolled around. "What do you want to say?" "Room cold." He came back at the end of the third year. His two words: "Bed hard." At the end of the fourth year, he used his opportunity to say: "I quit." The lead monk retorted, "You might as well. You've done nothing but complain since you've been here."

The man experienced a forced silence. This morning we look at a character from the broader Christmas story who was compelled to not speak. His silence only lasted three months. It's the story of Zechariah. It took place in the months leading up to Christ's birth, even prior to the pronouncement to Mary she'd have a baby.

Zechariah was old. Luke's account says, "well along in years." Old. The same was true of his wife Elizabeth. The most important factor is they were godly people who lived upright lives before God. However, there was a massive hole in their lives. Elizabeth had been unable to conceive. In that society, her condition was often regarded as an indication of God's disfavor. People didn't feel sorry for them but judged them.

Zechariah was a priest and it was his turn to serve at the temple. To top it off, he'd been chosen for the extremely high honor of supplying the altar with incense before the morning and evening sacrifices. This was a rare privilege that some priests never experienced.

READ Luke 1:11 - 20.

Zechariah, just like the shepherds who'd have an encounter with the angel at least a year and a half later, was afraid, gripped with fear. Fear's icy fingers grabbed him by the throat. This reaction was, again, because angels didn't routinely show up and when they did, it was usually to communicate something bad.

The angel Gabriel, one of two angels whose names are given in Scripture, didn't have bad news. He had incredible news. The old couple would have a child and they were to name him John. The child would be a cousin of Jesus. The angel told Zechariah what the child would mean to the couple: "He will be a joy and delight and many will rejoice because of his birth" (v. 14). The idea of delight is wild joy, exhilaration.

The angel also revealed John's monumental task. He would work to bring people back to God. He would be the forerunner who would go on before the Lord, before Jesus Christ, and prepare people so they'd see Jesus for who he is.

This was an incredible message for Zechariah. As you might expect, as we would in a similar situation, he has a difficult time understanding. "Wait a minute. Slow down. You're talking to old ears here." He offers up the seemingly insurmountable obstacle. "We're too old to have kids."

A strange reaction from a guy who'd been praying and praying to have a child. Gabriel reassured him they would indeed become parents. He'd been directed by God to tell Zechariah this good news. But then...the hammer...the bad news. Because Zechariah didn't believe, he wouldn't be able to speak until the baby was born.

The temple worshippers were growing concerned and worried because Zechariah should have completed his duties and emerged from behind the curtain. What was keeping him? Things didn't get any clearer when he finally came out as he wasn't able to speak. He could only use hand signals to try to indicate what had happened. People concluded he'd seen a vision. That was it. Nothing to see here as the supposed vision was over and nothing to hear here as Zechariah couldn't speak. Everybody went home. Including Zechariah and Elizabeth to their home. Sometime later Elizabeth became pregnant.

Nine months after that she gave birth to John. Her neighbors and relatives shared in her joy because the Lord had shown her great mercy. When it came time to name the boy, the relatives apparently had it figured out -- the baby should be named after his dad. Zechariah would be a fitting name. It means "the Lord has remembered." Elizabeth protested and said the boy would be named John. The family helpers countered, "Nobody in your family has that name, so how can this kid have that name?" They made signs to Zechariah and asked him. Zechariah requested a writing tablet. He wrote, "His name is John" to everyone's astonishment. By the way John means "graced by God" or "Jehovah has been gracious."

Immediately words poured out of the new dad's mouth. He began to praise God. All the neighbors throughout the entire hill country were filled with awe. People wondered what this child was going to be because they understood the Lord's hand was with him.

Zechariah offered up a song of praise. READ Luke 1:68.

The new dad spoke in present tense even though the things of which he spoke would take place in the future. It's as if they were already true even though his son was only eight days old and Jesus was probably six months or more away from being born. But to Zechariah...it was a done deal. It was cause for rejoicing.

Zechariah was filled with rejoicing, jumping for joy. He was looking forward to what John, his son, would accomplish and more importantly to what Jesus, the Son of God and Savior, would accomplish. Not to mention he could talk again. But then again, even if he weren't able to speak, I think he would have been filled with joy as he was looking forward to the promises of God being fulfilled.

The words used for joy throughout the birth narratives of John and Jesus express cheerfulness, gladness, wild joy, exhilaration. It's more than natural bubblyness, giddiness, perkiness or extroversion. Joy is something we receive from the Lord and it's also something we're commanded to do -- rejoice. The word "rejoice" is more frequently used in the Bible than the word "joy." The act takes precedence over the emotion.

Joy can be distinguished from happiness although they're sometimes used interchangeably in The Bible. Joy is deeper whereas happiness usually is on the surface. As Martin Lloyd Jones put it, "You cannot make yourself happy, but you can make yourself rejoice."

From where do we get joy? Believing in Jesus as Savior produces joy. Zechariah had joy and rejoiced because he was seeing what was going to take place. Remember, this was prior to Jesus coming. He likely died long before any of Jesus' ministry took place. He didn't witness Jesus teach about God, live a perfect life or give his life to provide forgiveness of sins and eternal life. But everything was vitally real to him.

We didn't see Jesus do those things either. We're on the other side of Christ's life. We're in the group of whom Scripture says, "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 1:8, 9). This is a cause for joy.

One day Jesus was talking with the 72 disciples who'd just returned from their mission of teaching about him. They were excited, ecstatic, jumping for joy and informed Jesus, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name" (Luke 10:17).

The Lord didn't squelch their enthusiasm but desired to redirect it. He talked about how he'd seen Satan fall like lightning from heaven and that he'd given them authority to overcome the enemy. "However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20). Their salvation, our salvation, is infinitely more valuable than having power to prevail over the devil or escape any harm he might inflict. We rejoice in the Lord (Philippians 3:1).

Joy also comes through obedience. "If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:10, 11). Even as there's a close connection between obedience to Christ and remaining in his love, so there is a close connection between obedience and experiencing joy.

It's like a child who's disobedient and knows it. They probably aren't experiencing a whole lot of joy knowing they're constantly living a life that's displeasing to their parents. Similarly, followers of Christ who live in ways displeasing to God probably don't have a whole lot of joy.

We gain more joy as we trust God. Scripture declares: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13). This verse contains the three themes we've been studying so far – hope, peace and joy. God will give more joy and peace as we trust him.

We are to be joyful in hope (Romans 12:12). What we're looking forward to, what we're anticipating with Jesus, what our hope is, should lead to joy. We probably don't focus on it enough. Maybe we don't think about it. We let other things creep in, all the other stuff of life that serves as distractions and detractors.

We rejoice with others who are rejoicing (Romans 12:15)...when something good happens in their lives...when they get a promotion...when they get a present they like and wanted and maybe even we wanted something like it... or didn't have somebody to give you something. Feeling bad for ourselves shouldn't prevent us from rejoicing with the person who is rejoicing.

We won't experience full and complete joy on earth. It's part of God's plan of "already but not yet." We have part of what he's prepared but not the totality. If we did, we probably wouldn't think of our future in heaven with Christ.

When is it too early to say, "Merry Christmas"? I was at the store and saw some people who could use a dose of merry and joy. I was afraid to say anything because it looked like they might bite off my head. It's possible they were going through a tough time. Maybe I should have tried and said something. Maybe it would have brought them a brief moment of joy/happiness, even if what they really need is more than words, but the occasion didn't arise to give more than that.

This past Wednesday, Family Life radio had a speaker who was talking about the story of Naomi and Ruth from the Bible. Naomi had experienced incredible loss. She'd left Israel, spent considerable time in a foreign land and returned to Israel, to Bethlehem. Some of the people who knew her weren't sure if it was Naomi or not because they didn't recognize her. Naomi said she wanted to be called by a different name, "Mara," because the Almighty had made her life very bitter. She said she went away full, but the Lord had brought her back empty" (Ruth 2:20, 21).

The speaker pointed out how Naomi had left Israel because there was a famine. Doesn't sound full physically. While she was gone her husband died and her sons died after they married. Not full. She did gain 2 daughters in law who loved her and one returned with her. Naomi said she returned empty. The speaker said, "How do you think that made Ruth, who was standing right beside her, feel?" He concluded people probably didn't recognize Naomi because bitterness has a way of changing the way people look.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we shouldn't be bitter and we shouldn't look as if we were bitter, that we constantly chew on sour grapes, wash it down with a gallon of vinegar and sour dill pickle juice while sitting on a porcupine.

Two of the villains of Christmas stories are Scrooge and the Grinch. If we combine them we come up with Scrinch or Grooge. I think there are far too many people, particularly people who profess Jesus Christ as Savior who come across as a Scrinch or Grooge and not just at Christmas. They feel any season is the season to be grumpy, grouchy, mopey, complaining, whiny, and moan. And then they wonder why no one is attracted to their version of Christianity.

Lack of joy is often caused by viewing life and the Christmas season through wrong-colored glasses. It may be green-tinted because money is the goal of everything and behind everything or because they're envious. It could be through messy cookie dough fingerprint covered glasses that see just all the stuff that needs to get done, the hecticness. It could be through mirrored lenses so they're looking back at themselves, to see how everyone is treating them, if they're getting their fair share.

An anonymous person wrote an article titled, "How to be Miserable." It offers the following advice: "Think about yourself. Talk about yourself. Use 'I' as often as possible. Mirror yourself continually in the opinions of others. Listen greedily to what people say about you. Expect to be appreciated. Be suspicious. Be

jealous and envious. Be sensitive to slights. Never forgive a criticism. Trust nobody but yourself. Insist on consideration and respect. Demand agreement with your own views on everything. Sulk if people aren't grateful to you for favors shown them. Never forget a service you have rendered. Shirk your duties if you can. Do as little as possible for others."

A focus on self is one of the biggest joy stealers. Another is discontentment, seemingly always wanting ("needing") something we don't have or is better or is more or just other. A critical spirit is another joy stealer in which we complain and gripe. Instead, we're to do everything without complaining about what's happening to us or about other people. Another joy stealer is sin. It affects our entire being including our emotional makeup. As King David said, "When I hid my sin, it was like rot in my bones."

We need joy because of its impact. Scripture says "a joyful heart is good medicine" (Proverbs 17:22). It has an effect on ourselves. It affects the rest of our lives and how we live them. It affects the quality and longevity of life. It will help us face the future far better than having a "woe is me" attitude.

It also affects the relationships we have with other members of the body of Christ and those who aren't. It can make us more pleasant to live with and will attract people to Jesus.

Joy is a choice. We can rejoice even as the prophet Habakkuk said, "I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (Habakkuk 3:18).

Zechariah found joy in the words/promises from God and the anticipation of what God would do. He was told the miracle son who would be born would be a joy and delight (wild joy) to them and many would rejoice (jump for joy) because of his birth (Luke 1:14).

There was a lot of joy and rejoicing in the Christmas narratives. Elizabeth leapt for joy when the baby in her womb leapt for joy when Mary came to visit the older woman who was six months pregnant (Luke 1:44). The visit led to Mary singing a song of praise to glorify God: "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:47). Elizabeth's neighbors and relatives shared her joy because God had shown mercy by allowing her to have a child (Luke 1:58). The angel of the Lord brought the shepherds "good news of great joy that will be for all people" (Luke 2:10). And the shepherds, the shepherds, rejoiced and rejoiced and were full of joy. They're often depicted as running and jumping and grabbing people and just being full of pure, unadulterated joy as they talked about what they'd seen and heard.

In a *Charlie Brown Christmas* Charlie Brown mopes because he can't find anyone to tell him the meaning of Christmas. Linus tells him, "Charlie Brown, you're the only person I know who can take a wonderful season like Christmas and turn it into a problem." Charlie got joy when Linus quoted from the Bible about what Christmas is all about.

It's Christmas. Duh. The Son of God came to earth. The Savior has been born. He is Christ the Lord. It's the time for us to rejoice. Find joy in what Jesus has done for us and the anticipation of what he will do. Jesus is our Ally who has come to liberate us from sin, death and the devil. Decide that we'll live with joy as a testimony to the good news of Christ's birth.