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Isaiah 40:1-11, Luke 1:24-45

Our New Testament passage follows immediately on last week's scripture. An Angel of the Lord has appeared to the childless priest Zachariah while he is serving in the temple. The angel announces that his wife, Elizabeth, who has been barren, will bear a child, whom we know as John the Baptist. Zechariah has been struck mute by the angel for his disbelief. Our story picks up this morning after Zechariah returns home. Listen now to the word of God from

Luke 1: 24-45

²⁴After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵"This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill

country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

This is the Word of God for the People of God.

This week, the answer to our Advent question, how does a weary world rejoice is: we find joy in connection.

In my first semester of seminary in Systematic Theology, our professor asked us to name where the heart of the story of Jesus lies. Is it Jesus' birth and incarnation? What about his life and ministry? His death? His resurrection? It was a question I had never thought about before. Each part of the story is informed by the others. I realized that for me, the heart of the story of Jesus Christ lies in the incarnation - God becoming flesh and blood and connecting with us in a way that is humanly tangible and accessible. It is in God coming to meet us, as we are, where we are, as we journey toward fullness of life in God, together with all of its messiness, weariness, and joy.

In the Advent and Christmas season, we celebrate this incarnational, connectational God. As I read through the text and pondered the theme for today, I kept coming back to verses 41 and 44 - the baby leapt in the womb of Elizabeth. This must be important - it is mentioned twice.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The passage this week tells us that Elizabeth was in seclusion for 5 months - that's 20 weeks - and the second trimester. Since this is her first child, she is likely just showing and the baby in her womb has just started moving. We don't know what her seclusion looks like, or why she is secluded. Perhaps she has a hard time believing the news herself and wants to avoid the looks of those around who will not believe that she is pregnant. Maybe she is throwing up all the time and craving strange combinations of food.

Perhaps Elizabeth, who hasn't been visited by an angel, and whose husband is mute, is confused and can't quite wrap her mind around what is happening, and so she is hiding. What we do know is that she proclaims that God has shown her favor and removed her disgrace. A disgrace that she has borne for a long time. A disgrace that perhaps has become part of her identity – not just a societal label, but a core belief about herself. And now, she has to rethink who she is and move from living in an attitude of disgrace to embracing the joy of God's favor.

It is at the end of this time of seclusion that Gabriel visits Mary. There is something important about Elizabeth's pregnancy timeline as it relates to Mary – the writer wants us to know how far along Elizabeth is, like a foreshadowing of what is to come. Because we have read the story, we know the leaping is coming.

When Mary is visited by Gabriel, she does not disbelieve what she is told and receives the angel with wonder, pondering his words, "favored one, the Lord is with you." I wonder how long Gabriel gives her to ponder before telling her not to be afraid and laying out the plan. Rather than denying what she is told about conceiving and bearing a son, she asks a very practical question.

How exactly is that going to happen to my body since I'm a virgin? It's a birds and bees question that receives an incarnational answer.

She receives Gabriel's explanation and the news about her cousin Elizabeth and gives her consent: "Here am I, servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Can you even imagine? And then the angel leaves her, and she is alone with this unbelievable news about her cousin – and herself. I bet she can hardly contain herself – and feels this news in her body – maybe frozen in place or pacing around. Her body feels the news and must do something.

I wonder, if Mary and Elizabeth had cell phones, if Mary would have texted Elizabeth the "exploding head" emoji – that character with the with smoke coming out of the top of its head – the one that represents shock, awe, amazement and/or disbelief. I think if I were in Mary's shoes, I'd be sending a whole string of those.

Mary travels 90 miles to see Elizabeth. It would have taken her nearly a week. I imagine even if this were to happen today, Mary would hop in the car to visit Elizabeth. This news is too big for text or a phone call. This news needs to be experienced in person, face to face, womb to womb.

Imagine Mary's anticipation in her days of travel. The fears, excitement, nervousness she might be experiencing. I wonder if she is traveling to avoid the shame of her community or if she is traveling to help old Elizabeth. I wonder too if it is her choice to go to Elizabeth or if she is sent there. I wonder if she is fearful that Elizabeth will reject her? I wonder if time is moving too slowly or too quickly for her.

Finally, she arrives, and when she does, oh, what a welcome she receives! I imagine the embrace they share, Elizabeth's swollen belly pressing into Mary's. The laughter, the tears, the instant understanding they share.

And the baby leaping. I wonder if Mary felt him as she embraced Elizabeth, even before she knew what she was feeling, their embrace being long and strong. Even this unborn child recognizes the savior that is to be born, even before his own birth. The one who will prepare the way for the good news of the Lord God made flesh, as the prophet Isaiah has foretold.

Elizabeth experiences joy in her body as the connection is made womb to womb and woman to woman. And this feeling, this physical sensation, propels her to proclaim Jesus as Lord – the first person, and only woman, to do so in Luke's gospel. I wonder if it takes this encounter with the mother of her Lord, to draw Elizabeth out of seclusion and fully into her understanding as one loved by God, whose wearying disgrace is met by the Joy of the Christ child to be born. And they stay together, presumably for 3 months until John is born. These two women, spanning generations, sharing the stories of faithful women who have gone before them and who bore unexpected children – Sarah, Hannah, and others. They would be one another's support, shelter, courage, and joy along the journey. Their relationship would give them strength and remind them that they are connected to one another and connected to God.

How does a weary world rejoice? We find joy in connection.

There is a Harvard Study that started in 1938 and tracked two groups of men: sophomore students at Harvard College and a group of boys from the poorest and most disadvantaged neighborhoods in Boston. They have studied 724 men over 75 years and the clearest message of the study is “good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period.” In a Ted talk from 2015, Robert Waldinger talks about the study and says they learned three lessons:

- Social relationships are good for us.

- The quality of close relationships matter – not the number of friends or if you are in a committed relationship.
- Secure relationships are good for our brains and help keep our memories intact longer.¹

Connection is what we are called to as a church, as children of God, as siblings in Christ who was born and walked on the earth like we do. Jesus connected with all kinds of people as he taught about the Kin-dom of hope, peace, and love that God was and is and always will call us to. Jesus drew people into relationship with one another and demonstrated what it is to be embodied with friends, with those who are in need of healing, and even with the powerful. And it was always about connection. Give what you have to the poor and follow me, she is your mother, he is your son. Love one another. Our call to connection is why we celebrated an agape feast a few weeks ago, attended an Interfaith Gathering for Solidarity and Peace. It is why we have so many small groups here, why we gather together, not only in prayer but in body, not only here in the sanctuary for worship, but throughout the week in different places.

Mary and Elizabeth set an example for us – and as our banner displays, we are called to be like our new banner, embracing one another and the world, in joy and in sorrow, each to flow from one to the other, supported by the universal love of God.

How does a weary world rejoice? We find joy in connection, in meaningful relationships and in sharing delights even with strangers.

I wonder who, or what you have connected with this week. Maybe an old friend, or a new one, or a best one. Maybe a teacher or a student. Maybe you connected through art, perhaps in the making of our new banner. Maybe you connected at the retreat last Saturday, or while baking cookies with the youth, or in a meeting, at the gym, at a concert, Bible Study, or the Alternative Christmas Market yesterday. Maybe you connected with nature, the beauty of the sky, the fur or scales or feathers of a pet. What connection do you need? And who do you know that needs connection, so that we may all feel the joy of John leaping in the womb at Mary's

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https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness/transcript?language=en

greeting and live preparing one another to proclaim Jesus as Lord.

Let us pray.

Ever present God, creator of our flesh and bone we give you thanks for your incarnation, for humbling yourself to life on this earth in order to draw us closer to you, and closer to one another. Grant us your presence, leap for joy with us whenever we witness you in neighbor, stranger, and friend. Amen.

Resources for further consideration

Thomas, Debie. *Into the Mess and Other Jesus Stories: Reflections on the Life of Christ*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022.

Nikondeha, Kelley. *The First Advent in Palestine: Reversals, Resistance, and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope*. Minn: Broadleaf Books, 2022.

Long, Thomas G. *Something is About to Happen . . . Sermons for Advent and Christmas*. Lima, OH: CSS Publishing, 1996.

Bozzuti-Jones, Mark. *The Womb of Advent*. NY: Church Publishing, 2007.

Borg, Marcus and John Dominic Crossan. *The First Christmas: What the Gospels really Teach about Jesus' s Birth*. NY: Harper Collins, 2007.

Doyle, Glennon and Ross Gay, guest. "How to Find Delight Today (and Every Day)" June 6, 2023. *We Can Do Hard Things* Ep216. <https://momastery.com/blog/we-can-do-hard-things-ep-216/>

Waldinger, Robert. "What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness" TEDxBeaconStreet, November 2015. https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness?language=en