

Mary's Joy... through the eyes of Elizabeth

Based on Luke 1:26–56

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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(In the first chapter of Luke (Luke 1: 5–25) we read the story of Zachariah and Elizabeth. Zachariah was a priest, married to Elizabeth. They had no children, but longed for a child. When they were quite old, Zachariah was met by an angel in the Temple where he was burning incense. The angel told him that his prayer for a child would be answered and that Elizabeth would become pregnant. Zachariah challenged the angel (it's a funny scene – read it!) and because he wouldn't believe the heavenly messenger, was struck dumb until the day that his son, John and baptizer, was born.

(Pastor Mary—dressed as Elizabeth—enters and waves!)

Go in peace, and may God bless you, Mary. Be safe and deliver a healthy child... Jesus.

Three months ago, Mary arrived at my home... a slip of a thing, and now she departs full of life – the mother of my Lord. Miracles upon miracles.

Don't stare. Have you never seen an old woman in the family way? Well, of course you haven't! If this pregnancy weren't happening to me, I wouldn't believe either!

I am Elizabeth, daughter of the tribe of Aaron, married to the priest, Zechariah. I'd call him to come and share some bread and wine with us, but I sent him to accompany Mary back to Nazareth. Anyway, he

wouldn't be very good company right now. Several months ago, after returning from the temple, he simply went silent. Mind you, he never was the chatty type, but still... it was an odd thing. I've gotten used to it now... living in silence in my own home. I am grateful for the ability to read a bit and communicate that way. Though before Mary arrived, I was lonely. Lonely, because my home with a silent Zechariah and no sons or daughters had little laughter or song. Lonely because the women of my village avoided me... as though late in life pregnancy is catching.

So when my kinswoman Mary showed up a few months ago, I ran to her, took her in my arms and hugged her tight, and as she called my name, Elizabeth, Elizabeth...

He leapt! The child within me jumped for joy... It was as though he recognized something before any of us. And when that happened, I laughed out loud! My soul spoke before I knew what my words were saying, "Blessed are you among women, Mary!" Pulling her inside, I begged her to tell me her story. And what an amazing story it is!

Several weeks before, late one night, as Mary stood at her window gazing upon the night sky – probably day dreaming about her betrothed, Joseph, who I hear is kind and good, talented, and very handsome – she sensed a large, bright presence behind her. She turned and saw that it was an angel. Terrified at first, and unable to speak, she fell to the floor. Angels are fierce... just thinking about it causes me to tremble. But instead of being stern or violent, this angel spoke to Mary in a gentle voice saying, "Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you."

Favored one! Our Mary, the one I held and rocked as a baby when she couldn't sleep? From a poor family, and ordinary enough, destined for a life of hard work and babies. Favored one? Yet, even as a young girl you could see that she was kind and faithful, curious, smart. She was the one who would listen as her brothers recited the prayers and scripture – she

could recite them better than they! And she was a dreamer... Mary was always that child that seemed content to sit and think, to wonder as she stared into the heavens.

“Mary,” her mother would scold – pay attention to your stitching!

“Mary,” stop staring and help with the wash.

And, oh, how she loved stories! She was the one who would beg to hear just “one more story” before bed around the campfire and would make up tales as she went about her chores.

So Mary being Mary, she didn’t just blurt out everything she was feeling or demand that the angel tell her just what in the world he was doing in her little home in Nazareth. She was perplexed and so she just listened. The angel continued... “Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God.”

And, you know? Mary found that she wasn’t afraid... not quite. She was raised on stories of women of our faith and tales passed from mother to daughter throughout generations, her mind filled with names and images of other women favored by God... Miriam, Deborah, Sarah, Rachael, Hannah. So her breath slowed down and the urge to jump up and run from the room left her. She listened some more to the angel’s voice.

“Now, you will conceive in your womb and you will bear a son and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the son of the most high, and he will be given the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Okay, now, at this point, Mary’s keen mind and curiosity simply got the better of herself – she looked up and into the angel’s eyes -- eyes that radiated love and not fire -- and said, “But how can this be? I am a

young maiden, and have never been with a man.” Mary is young, but she knows where babies come from!

The angel answered, “The holy spirit will come over you and power of the most high will overshadow you and therefore the baby born will be the Son of God.”

Now this is when I stopped my dear cousin – please, Mary. Son of God? From Nazareth of all places? From a defenseless girl’s body? A helpless baby? Honestly, I thought this could be another of her pretend stories – fantasies about talking donkeys, magic figs, or stars that sang in the night sky.

Mary stopped me – no, Elizabeth, this is the truth! Listen to me, listen with your heart and soul.

You see, the angel revealed to Mary that I, too, was carrying a child – a special son... and only Zechariah and I know that our child will be offered to God in service his whole life. I felt a chill go down my spine. How could news of my pregnancy traveled so quickly? Could this really be a heavenly messenger? Surely there has been gossip, but after the first side glances and hurtful words from townspeople, I’ve been keeping to myself, living with Zechariah, leaving our home only to fetch water. And heaven knows, Zechariah didn’t tell anyone!

What was God up to? One woman old, a dried husk, now alive with possibility after years of longing and praying for a child... and another young, just barely beyond childhood, now laden with the enormous task of bearing a son before she was even wed. And both sons dedicated to God, our family’s lives, forever changed, forever intertwined.

“Oh, and Elizabeth, Mary interrupted my thoughts, the angel said, ‘For nothing will be impossible with God.’”

I thought about the words of the prophet Isaiah to whom God spoke, saying “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts... You shall go out in joy and be led back in peace...” Isaiah 55:8–9

As though supported by strong arms of all the faithful women who had come before her, Mary looked directly into the angel’s face and responded, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Mary... what courage... yet... who are we to question the ways of Almighty God? What have we to say before the Throne of the most high?

The angel departed as quickly as he had come.

Well, I couldn’t listen to Mary any longer... I’m not a deep thinker like she is... I needed to move, to make myself useful and keep my hands busy. Come, Mary, let us tend to the evening meal... we have bread to bake and Zechariah will be home soon.

We went about our work that day side by side in an easy quiet.

Mary’s face, though newly pregnant, glowed from within. She would not experience the illness her old cousin did those first few months.

Overnight, it seemed, the little girl was gone, and in her place a woman of unexpected strength, dignity and courage, accepting her part in God’s unfolding story with God’s people.

Mary’s encounter with the angel nagged at me, pulled me this way and that. It didn’t take long for me to wonder about Joseph. I feared for her.

Mary... what will Joseph do when he learns your news? Won’t he be hurt? He could have you stoned to death, you know. At the very least,

the townspeople will shame you and their cruelty will make you suffer. Are you really ready for that?

Ready? Oh, Elizabeth... I... I. I don't know what Joseph will do, I only know that I trust the God of our ancestors who chose me to bear this child. God is gracious unto us and surely God will provide a way.

When Zechariah came home that evening, I held him extra tight.

Arm in arm, in our silence, for even I had very few words that evening, we looked into the courtyard, where Mary stood, framed by the setting sun, singing out hauntingly beautiful words to a song of praise and thanksgiving to the God who chose her to bear God's child.

This baby... this Jesus... Mary knows, deep in her soul, that he will somehow set us free, will usher in a new creation as we've been promised. She is pregnant with hope for our people.

Mary cannot know how or when Jesus will display his power, or how my son might be part of that mission. After years of our people enduring plagues and exile, famine and disappointment, even now, suffering under the yoke of Roman occupation. Mary's song spoke of the joy of the day when God's peace for all people, not just some, will reign.

Those magnificent words fill my heart even now..."God has brought down the powerful ones from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things... It's exactly what God promised, beginning with Abraham right up until now."

Blessed, she is, our Mary. So very young, in love with Joseph, in love with God, the woman who will raise a child that will bring much joy, but surely break her heart, and bring her to tears, as all children do. Such a mighty job for one so inexperienced, but truly nothing is impossible with God.

The divine light shines within you, dear Mary, my kinswoman, my friend. Now we are wrapped in a cloak of God's promise in the birth of our sons. We will need one another as the years unfold and we walk together into God's future.

Peace and grace be with you now, and with all those who long for the promised day when God's love and justice will reign.

AMEN.