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Joy in Connection

Luke 1:24-45

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

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The 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. And 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. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then 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.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "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 leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

One of my favorite shows to watch with my daughter, Evie, is the Great British Baking Show. Something like twelve seasons in, it is a delightful, cozy, relaxing show to put on the TV and enjoy at the end of the day. The bakers are kind to each other and the judges are never too harsh or yelling at anyone. There is plenty of laughter and imaginative, delicious looking treats are created. Lately though, my favorite moments of the show are these few seconds that happen at the very end, during the credits basically. Sometimes, at the end of the show, whoever has won star baker for that week (the best baker of the week), will call someone to tell them they won, often their moms and we, the audience,

get to hear as the other person answers the phone, takes in the good news and usually screams in excitement for the star baker. It's just this little moment of delight where we get to witness that amazing moment of joy. For the star baker, you can see part of the reality of their winning sink in in a new way as they share their joy with their loved one. And for the caller, you can hear their utter and true joy for the other person's achievement.

And I think I like it so much because while much of the show is edited and even scripted "reality" these little moments are so genuine. It makes me think of my own moments of shared joy. Can you remember a time you had good news to share and suddenly, in telling someone that good news, your joy expanded and grew so you felt like you might burst?

Or can you remember a moment when you've received someone else's good news and you were just really and truly happy for them, in such a genuine joy that you had to shout, or hug them, or pump your fist in the air - some kind of physical response of joy?

Our theme this Advent is How Does A Weary World Rejoice? This week the answer we're exploring is: we find joy in connection. Alone, weariness might overwhelm us, but when we can share in someone else's joy or share our joy with someone else, our joy expands and deepens and becomes a powerful force in opposition to weariness.

Our scripture for today, on the surface, is filled with these unrelatable things - angels and miraculous pregnancies but there is something very relatable human there at the root too the joy Mary and Elizabeth find in their connection.

When the scripture starts out, we hear that Elizabeth is pregnant. It is the answer to what she has prayed for for years. Only, she's too old to be pregnant. Obviously too old. And the scripture tells us that while she is glad to not be disgraced anymore and is glad to have found God's favor, it also tells us that she is secluded, isolated, alone. It is five months into her pregnancy and she is alone.

Now, we can imagine a few reasons – maybe it is a difficult pregnancy; maybe it is hard to be with other people either because her peers children were grown up and had children of their own or maybe she felt uncomfortable going out where perhaps people stared or whispered at the jarring sight of an elderly woman with a pregnant belly.

Regardless of why, she is alone, at home with Zechariah, who cannot speak, and you have to imagine, she must have longed for someone to talk to, someone to celebrate with, someone who could understand this impossible thing that was happening to her.

And then, in comes Mary. Now, Elizabeth knew nothing of Mary's pregnancy before she arrived, but when Mary got to her door, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and scripture says she spoke in a loud voice and proclaimed Jesus as Lord. No angel had told her about Mary. Mary hadn't yet spoken a word. But the baby in Elizabeth's womb, the one who will prepare the way for Jesus, recognized the baby in Mary's womb, and Elizabeth did too. And finally, she had someone to rejoice with. Finally, there is someone else who knows what it is to be in such a strange and impossible situation. Finally, her private joy could be shared and, in the sharing, increased.

And the same is true for Mary. In Mary's part of the story, she is at home minding her own business when in comes Gabriel with an impossible sounding story. She, a servant girl, a young girl, no one special, was going to give birth to the son of the Most High? Mary rightly questioned the angel Gabriel – how can this be? And Gabriel told Mary she was not alone. She was not the only one with an impossible pregnancy. Her relative, Elizabeth, previously unable to have a child, years past child bearing, is also pregnant. It's right after hearing that, Mary said "here I am. Let it be with me just as you have said." And then, she hightailed it to Elizabeth. She took an 80 mile journey so she could be with someone who would understand. Someone who could look at her not with suspicion or scorn, but someone who upon seeing her, rejoiced. Someone who believed in the impossible because she knew the impossible herself. And we can only imagine what it must have felt like for Mary to stand on Elizabeth's doorstep and hear her shout for joy. Elizabeth may be the only person who celebrated Mary's pregnancy like that.

So, perhaps knowing she wouldn't be alone in this impossible, otherwise lonely task, is a big reason Mary had the strength and courage to say yes. And consider for a moment how amazing that Elizabeth is the first person to name Jesus as Lord. She was the first person on earth to recognize his true nature - not some scholar or rabbi, but a woman of no real status. I don't know why Luke chose to include this story in his gospel, but because we can read about these two women meeting, we get this beautiful example of how joy expands and deepens through connection.

Of course, we can look around the world and at our own lives and know that sometimes our connections with other people don't look like this. Sometimes when we try to connect with each other the exact opposite happens. We may misunderstand each other. We may connect in ways which lead to anger, jealousy, fear and even greater loneliness. And of course, there is the pain and grief of losing people we are connected to whether in death or growing apart or conflict. Connection can bring a lot of emotions with it and it would be inauthentic to try and pretend it always brings joy.

But, Elizabeth and Mary are wonderful examples of what is possible in human connection

- of the joy that can be created, multiplied, and increased through connection. We Presbyterian, Protestant Christians sometimes have the reputation of being awfully serious. And certainly, one of the things we are good at is the serious work of justice and of reaching out to those who are struggling or suffering. But if we are only serious; if we only keep our heads down to study and serve, there may be good work done but we will likely also grow weary. If we forget how important joy is, what a gift joy is; if we don't make room for joy - seek it, embrace it, encourage it - then weariness is eventually quite likely to overtake us.

So, what does it look like to cultivate joy? First, we remember that sometimes the best way to feel joy isn't about connection with other people at all. Sometimes our greatest joy comes in connecting with God in intimate, quiet moments - moments when God comes close.

Or sometimes our greatest joy is in connection with God's creation – the amazing sunrise, the bird that lands on your feeder, the walk by Lake Michigan. One of the most joyous moments of my life was something that feels silly to share, but was an hour of walking in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan all by myself on a trail by a river. I was listening to one of my favorite songs and I was overwhelmed by a deep sense of joy that led me to singing and dancing all the way. It was a feeling of such pure joy for just being in the world.

But, one of the greatest gifts of being human is the opportunity to find joy in and with each other. So, how do we cultivate joy with other people? Well, first we acknowledge there are things that get in the way.

One thing that gets in the way is how much time we spend comparing ourselves and worrying about how we match up to others. When we do this, we often find that instead of experiencing joy in others accomplishments or joyful moments, we feel jealous. Or worse, we think they don't deserve their joy. Why don't we have that? Why didn't that happen to us? When will it be our turn? So we have to stop with all that comparison - which obviously takes some work, some intention, and may never go away entirely, but reminding ourselves to be grateful for what we have, who we are, the gifts we've been given is a start.

Another thing which can get in the way is too great a sense of modesty or humbleness. Modesty or humbleness aren't bad, but we can take them too far. Midwesterners are quite famous for being rather stoic and for having a sense that one of the worst things you can be is a braggart. But there is a difference between bragging and honestly sharing our joy. In fact, if we never share our joys then we rob other people of the joy they would experience on our behalf. So, we start small with the people we know will celebrate with us and make a point of telling them our successes and the good things.

It would be good for us to think of joy as a spiritual discipline because it is something we can get better at with practice. Our faith community is a good place to start practicing. In this place, we are invited not only to bring our sorrow and grief and struggle, but our joys – big and little. This is a place to share our joys and its a good place to practice receiving others' joys in open hearted ways - maybe even with a shout or a hug. A new job you love? Amazing! A role in the school play? Incredible! A new grandbaby? Hallelujah!. A new love in your life? Hooray! Retirement? Awesome! Making a hard but good decision for yourself? Yes!

Whatever it is that brings you joy, find someone to share it with, let someone celebrate with you. And look for opportunities to celebrate other people's joy, don't temper your response but instead practice letting your joy out. Consider it one of the ways you will combat weariness in the world - a little act of resistance against the voices out there and inside our heads that sometimes prefer to make lists of all the weary things of the world. And when we come to Christmas Eve and we finish singing Silent Night, may we lift our voices to sing Joy to the World together and may it ring so deeply, so true in our hearts - a joy that expands and increases until we just might burst. Amen.