

Part 5: Songs of Joy

Tyler Velin | Luke 1:39-56

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In Vienna of 1824, one of the most famous pieces of music was introduced for the first time by one of the world's greatest composers. This piece was revolutionary not only for its symphonic beauty, but it also added, to no small amount of criticism, a new element to the traditional symphony experience: the human voice.

As the whole movement of the symphony progressed through tumult and trial this piece, accompanied by the voice of many, began to signify the end of war, the end of tension, and the victory of human brotherhood and peace. Technically the piece is the prelude to the fourth and final movement of Ludwig Van Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*, but is more commonly called: Ode to Joy.

The gravitas of Ode to Joy is so immense that the Council of Europe selected it as its national anthem in 1975 to communicate the longing for deep joy which cures the ills of the world. In its original German, the lyrics rang of a longing for something divine to unify all mankind in joy. Beethoven was not a born again believer, instead he believed in what I often call, "the God-goo." That is he believed in some sort of "God," but refused to believe in the Trinitarian God of scripture and had no interest in the person of Jesus Christ.

Yet his masterpiece smacks with a longing which can only be fulfilled in the hope of Christianity. As the piece concludes it calls humanity to look to the sky, and to hopefully find their creator as it ends, "beyond the stars he must dwell."

Today we encounter what can properly be called, the first Ode to Joy: two women taken up in holy exclamation because of the wonder they are experiencing. Joy, blessing, and hope abound from the lips of Mary and Elizabeth today but their joy is even better than the hope of Beethoven.

For they did not rejoice that God might exist beyond the stars, but that God had stepped down from behind the stars in Jesus Christ the baby who is fully God, and fully man. This beautiful event marked the beginning of a new and distinct joy not only for these two individuals but for all who share their faith in Jesus.

What we are going to see today is a meeting between Mary, who will bear Christ the Lord, and her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant with the Lord's messenger, John the Baptist. Between the two messages of these women we see not only responses of joy but the source and substance of joy in Jesus Christ which shapes our shared fellowship and our individual longings.

This morning we are going to see five specific pictures of joy in what was just read for us: **Shared joy, thoughtful joy, fearful joy, humble joy and hopeful joy.**

Let's begin with a bit of context from Luke in **Luke 1:39-40.**

In the preceding passage Gabriel appears to Mary and announces to her the miracle of her virginal conception and as a sign tells her that Elizabeth, the old barren wife of the priest Zechariah, has also conceived. In this miracle is the proof of Mary's miracle.

We saw last week, that even though Mary didn't see Elizabeth, she believed Gabriel. Yet, as faith always should do, it motivated Mary to seek even greater certainty and understanding. So much so that Luke tells us Mary made haste to go and see what else God had done. So she leaves her town of Nazareth and heads south to the hill country of Judah and there she enters the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

What we might hope to see as confirmation, if we were Mary, would be to see that baby bump of Elizabeth. But God is actually going to do far more than that when it comes to proof. The result of what is going to follow is nothing short of joy, and joy abundantly. This is where we encounter our first point today: **Shared Joy**.

Read with me **Luke 1:41-45**.

So here we have four primary characters in this passage: the baby John the Baptist, Elizabeth his mother, Mary the cousin, and God the Holy Spirit and the end result of all of this fellowship is shrieking, leaping, and encouraging joy.

All of this begins as John, in the womb, hears Mary's voice and leaps in his mother's womb.

I'm not a woman, but I'm the son of a woman. I'm the husband of a woman, and I've felt babies kick from the outside. But I've only been able to observe women who receive a kick from the inside. But here, a child who is six months old leapt in his mother's womb.

I can only imagine that sensation! And there are two things worth noting about this. First, that it was the child in the womb who being already filled with the Holy Spirit as Gabriel prophesied, who recognized the cosmic joy of what was going on.

John didn't leap because he was hungry, John leaped for joy because the wall of his mother's belly couldn't conceal the incoming promise and presence of Mary.

If there were anything to shape the church's zeal for the unborn, may it be here John's wonderful worship. You can categorize the movement opposed to abortion as pro-life, or conservative, and it is generally both, however it should be more simply labeled as Christian.

It is our privilege to partner with CareNet locally on behalf of the unborn and their mothers. We not only give financially to that end, but we have a pack and play set up in the fellowship area by our "Meals for Moms" crew where you can donate baby items and diapers.

But almost just as important as meeting and supporting these needs are the emotional needs those who find themselves in situations of unwanted pregnancies, or even those who have already had abortions, might have.

Remarkably, 36% of all women who receive abortions identify as church goers. That means that we as a church need to make this a safe place for women who find themselves in a position like this to talk and come forward. No one is asking you to turn a blind eye to the circumstances which might have led to

this pregnancy. But we can deal with all of that while also celebrating and caring for what God is now knitting together in the womb of what is probably a vulnerable, ashamed, and fearful woman.

Sin is real, shame is painful but repentance is powerful, grace is available and the church is called to be compassionate and caring in the midst of these moments. So if you are a young lady who finds yourself in a situation like I want you to know that you don't have to bear that decision alone. You don't have to talk to your parents alone. The elders and the members here at this church want to help you and even rejoice with you, not at the circumstances, but at the meaning both you and that baby have to us and to God.

Secondly, not only does John point us to children in the womb, but he also pointed Elizabeth to the work of God. It was John's joyful gymnastics which alerted Elizabeth to the reality that something amazing was happening and in that moment, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit herself and began to exclaim (quite loudly Luke points out) with joy.

She proclaims blessing on Mary, blessing on the child which would be born by Mary, she praises Mary for her deep faith even in the midst of what was surprising and even difficult news. But then she also expresses her own personal joy that here, she is privileged to see, to hug, and to rejoice with the mother of her Lord. How much more joy should there be for us who have the privilege of receiving Jesus himself!

But here is what is important to notice. Mary received a message directly from the Lord on her own. Elizabeth was six months pregnant as proof of the miraculous message the Lord gave her husband. Both seemed to individually have all they needed for belief and for joy, but in coming together the joy they had in God's promise individually multiplied in community.

It was said once that grief grows greater by concealing, joy by expression. Here we see the beautiful joy of gospel fellowship, the joy of gospel community. Here the Holy Spirit so worked in the assembly of these three humans that it gave John ears to hear, it gave Elizabeth words to say, and it gave Mary the privilege of encouraging another by simply being present.

The gospel brings people together and even in the midst of confusing circumstances, joy can follow. Here Elizabeth is learning to live with a mute husband, here Mary is learning to bear the burden of being an unmarried pregnant lady, but when they come together God works in both their lives through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Beginning January 9th we are going to begin a sermon series walking through what we do when we gather together as a church and how it has an impact on our shared joy. We believe God works individually, but we also believe that God works in a profound way when we gather together. Notice how Paul puts this in **Ephesians 3:17-19**.

It is with all the saints, saints at church, saints at community group, saints in discipleship, saints at dinner time, saints in counseling, saints together with tears, saints together with laughter, saints together in the power of the Holy Spirit that we understand the multidimensional power of God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

The gospel brings us shared joy, because as Jesus bears our sins in his body, his resurrection brings us together in a new body, the church, where we together encourage and support each other's joy.

This spirit-empowered utterance by Elizabeth gives way in the narrative to another powerful song of joy by Mary. Let's read this song now together: **Luke 1:46-55**.

This song is one of the most famous song-prayers of all the Bible and it is worthy of much of our attention today.

First we see that it displays Mary's **Thoughtful Joy**.

Some scholars think that this must have been added afterwards because they doubt Mary could come up with a song like this on the spot. Additionally, they point out that unlike Elizabeth, and unlike the song of Zechariah we will see next week, it is not made explicit that Mary is being uniquely filled with the Holy Spirit.

But this is where we can see two things. First, Luke constantly displays Mary as one who is extremely thoughtful. She is of all things, a thinker, a ponder-er, and one who often marvels and considers all she is taking in.

And this thoughtful young woman just completed what would be probably a 50-70 mile journey without trains or cars, to visit her cousin. Last week Mary began the process of considering and submitting herself to God's plan, and she just had a long road trip to think, dwell and ponder on this miracle.

But secondly, while she might not have been uniquely anointed by the Holy Spirit for this song, she was remarkably rich with the Old Testament scriptures. One scholar says that there are upwards of 12 clear references and allusions to prayers and songs in the Old Testament, most markedly the prayer of Hannah who miraculously conceived in 1 Samuel 2.

Here we see the wonderful power scripture has upon us and the reminder that to be filled with scripture is never to be at want for the Holy Spirit, for as God indwells his word, so he indwells our own hearts. Consider Paul in **Colossians 3:16**.

Mary knew her experience, but she knew that God had supplemented her personal experience with the experiences of other saints, relying on the same faithful God, in the pages of scripture. Where we walk as Christians, we never walk alone when we are faithful to read God's word.

This coming New Year we are going to launch a new Bible reading plan that will actually have an app to work with it. On it you'll be able to read along with others in the church, and there's also a Bible memory plan along with it so that we might together remind ourselves, and have our own songs of joy and lament, influenced by God's word. What beautiful songs might we sing if we make effort to allow God's word to dwell richly inside of each of us?

We also see her thoughtful joy in **Luke 1:46-49**.

Here we see another truth which breaks down the Roman Catholic idolatry of Mary. Mary herself expresses a need for a savior in her opening line. What drives Mary's joyful song is nothing short than a celebration of her own salvation through the son she was about to bear.

As a result of something so profound she doesn't simply believe this miracle of salvation and move on. She wants to magnify it. In other words she herself not only wants to make bigger the truths of God's promise in her own heart, but she wants others to see the beauty of God's salvation in her own life.

All of this, all of what God has done for her, in looking at her humble state, in doing something mighty for her, is something she wants the world to know and see in her joy. May we never believe the lie that the gospel is Christianity 101, and afterwards we move on to more exciting doctrines. The gospel consumes the life of a believer for the sake of personal and public joy.

What does thoughtful reflection and intentional magnification of the gospel look like in your own life?

This might begin by simply doing a study this week on Mary's song and noting all the things God is doing in this text. This text song is primarily a song about all that God is doing in the gospel. In Mary's words, I found 10 actions of God in this text. Why don't you see if you can find them, or even more! And as you find these actions ask yourself, think to yourself, what they communicate about our God and how that affects your own worship. This is thoughtful joy.

But, as Mary continues in her song we see what might be the pivot of the whole thing when she gets at the paradox of **Fearful Joy**.

Look with me at **Luke 1:50**.

At Christmas time we often turn to traditions and heirlooms and we love these things because they are able to be handed down from generation to generation. Typically "heirloom" products are of a higher quality because they are built to withstand the passing of time.

But here we see the most valuable thing we can pass down to our kids, one which will neither fade nor crumble, is the mercy of God. We grow old. Oak chests eventually break. Retirement accounts get emptied. Even the mountains around us show the effect of constant exposure and deterioration to the elements. But God's mercy will never fail. It is always there. Reliable, comforting, and profound.

Yet his mercy, though always accessible to anyone, is only claimed by those who fear him.

Haven't we already seen this applied in Elizabeth's blessing to Mary: **Luke 1:45**. She is blessed because she believed. We just came out of Proverbs so the idea of the fear of the Lord shouldn't be too foreign to us, but to fear the Lord is to have a reverent reliance upon the Lord.

The gospel gives us a right kind of fear. A fear which saves. The gospel takes sinners who rightly say, "If I go near to this God, I'll die," and causes them say, "If I don't go near to this God, I will die." The fear of the Lord calls us to rely on God and his promise with desperate exclusivity. Here is mercy that all who humble themselves and come to Jesus are saved.

This is really important for what is about to follow in Mary's song because if we miss this line it will just seem that God universally hates the powerful and the rich, and God universally saves the humble, hungry and poor.

Our culture loves the idea of humbling the powerful and exalting the vulnerable. But it is not because people are hungry that they are saved, nor is it because the rich are fed that they are condemned. Even

the hungry, if they fear the Lord will be filled with God's good grace, and even the rich in all their power if they do not repent, will perish.

It is as Paul says in **Galatians 3:28-29**. What matters most in our life is not primarily our fortunes or our influence but our fear. What matters most is if you identify your greatest hope in Jesus, or in something else. To come to Jesus is to get this mercy and we can really bank on that. But this mercy which lives in gospel shaped fear is also a humbling mercy.

This is the next aspect of Mary's joy: **Humble joy**.

To be saved by this Jesus is to realize that God privileges things the world doesn't. Read with me: **Luke 1:51-53**.

There was once a missionary to India who was warned to not preach Mary's song in his church because "It is a most revolutionary canticle!"

For those who sat under an oppressive government at the time, this song smacked of revolutionary aspirations. But the truth of the matter is that this song, Mary's hope, and the message of the gospel is built on the promise of a total social inversion.

Now we need to qualify this briefly. There is a false gospel many churches are adopting which is called "the social gospel." It's not that the social gospel is after wrong things, it's actually after the right things in the wrong order. Part of what is believed by the social gospel is that the goal of the church is to eliminate all inequality in the world. But the mission of the church is given to us by Jesus to make disciples of all nations (equally-so) baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Spirit, teaching them to obey all Jesus has given us.

Additionally the proponents of the social gospel believe that all of us would be good and kind towards each other if only inequality and poverty were removed. But inequality and poverty are symptoms of the greatest problem of sin. James shows us that the external conflicts in our world are the fruit of the internal war in our heart: the war of sin. Poverty and inequality are problems, but they are not the chief problem, sin is. To be saved from poverty but to not be saved from sin is to not be saved at all.

The social gospel is dangerous and no gospel at all. But, the gospel does have social impact. If the idea of caring for those who are hurting and in need around us, the idea of assessing where our hearts privilege people who live, or look like us makes you uncomfortable, then you are going to be extremely uncomfortable with the Jesus Luke presents to us.

We will see this unfold more as the story of the gospel moves forward. But for right now the Old Testament themes which Mary brings forward in this text are meant to challenge our joy in a specific way: Would you rather find your joy in the promises of the world, or in the promises of God's salvation.

To trust in the thoughts, thrones, riches of the world is to find yourself one day woefully unequipped. God's not opposed to brains, positions, or money. But he knows those who have those things often find themselves trusting their own thoughts, finding comfort in their own power, and loving their own money over and above God himself.

Similarly, those who live under oppression are not born into a uniquely privileged state, but it is a position in which people generally see their own weaknesses with clarity. Here those who see their needs, and see their weaknesses, are reminded of a hope that comes from outside themselves and hope that comes to those who fear the Lord. A hope which will one day right the scales of justice for all who come to Jesus.

This gospel is a revolutionary gospel and while we should have discussion on what implications this might have in our world, I'd ask you to first consider what it might look like in your heart. Gabriel already told us that the gospel is going to turn our hearts towards God and towards others. Philippians 2 shows us that it is this incarnation of Jesus which is the seedbed of humility in our hearts, it's the spring from which we draw the ability to consider others as worthy of more honor than ourselves.

This social and introspective inversion is only dangerous to those who do not humbly fear the King who has come to establish this kingdom. But to everyone else who trusts in him, and who waits for him, this is our humble joy.

Lastly, Mary shows us **Hopeful Joy**.

Read with me: **Luke 1:54-56**.

Here at the end, Mary reminds her and Elizabeth, and by nature all who were waiting for the Lord's Messiah, that God has remembered his mercy. We might have thought God would forget us, we might see others prospering by worldly standards and think that we missed out on the joy in this world, but here Mary reminds us all that God never forgets his mercy.

Just as God promised Abraham, and all those who came afterwards, God holds out his promise to all who are waiting on him. As New Testament believers we see this promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ so we of all people know that God is faithful.

Next week we are going to see in detail the tracing out of God's promise but this week I want us to see that God not only remembers and keeps his promise, but that he helps those who are waiting.

Turning our circumstances over to gospel joy sounds easy, but as we see it takes humble, thoughtful effort. But to walk in the path of gospel celebration is something that God has promised to help us in as well.

As Jesus sends out his church he equips them with both the task of living and the help he provides: **Matthew 28:18-20**.

To walk in the promise of God is to walk in the assurance of hope, that in Jesus, God has come to help you and at the end of all things you might look back and say: "He who is mighty has done a great thing for me."