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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“THE BIRTH OF JOY”

Luke 1:39-45

? *Is joy possible?* It is rather grim to ask this so near to Christmas, but people are wrestling with this question.

Is joy possible when our world is wracked by war, torn apart by greed and fear, staggering under its crushing burden of immorality, injustice, and idolatry?

Is joy possible when our culture is caught in a seemingly unstoppable whirlwind of materialism, noise, busyness, distraction, shallowness, anxiety and fatigue?

Is joy possible when our lives are invaded by financial stress, family breakdown, violence, sickness, chronic pain, and death?

? *Is joy possible? Can joy be birthed in our hearts this Christmas? If so, can this joy serve a greater cause than our own pleasure? Can God work through us to bring real, deep, life-transforming joy to the world?*

□ Consider Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah. We first meet them in Luke 1.

■ Verse 5a: **“In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah.”** {1 Ch 24:10; Neh 12:12} The priests of Israel are organized into 24 divisions. The division to which Zechariah belongs was first led by his ancestor Abijah 1,000 years earlier. Abijah traced his lineage back several more centuries to Aaron.

■ Verse 5b: Zechariah’s **“wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.”** Not only is Elizabeth married to a priest, her father was a priest.

■ Verse 6: **“Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly.”** These are good people. They love the Lord with their words and actions, by what they say and do, by what they left unsaid and undone.

■ And then verse 7b: **“And they were both well along in years.”** Gray hair is a badge of honor. Jewish elders are respected for their knowledge and experience. They exercise vital leadership in the community, blessing the people with their insight and expertise until they are physically unable.

In a family-centered culture that enshrines marriage, this couple has been married for decades.

In an ancient culture that treasures an honorable bloodline, this couple traces theirs all the way back to Aaron.

In a temple-centered culture that reveres its priests, this couple is a priestly family.

In a highly religious culture that venerates the Law, this couple keeps it without fail.

In an elder-centered culture that honors seniors, this couple is **“well along in years.”**

It is the perfect recipe for joy, minus one ingredient: one *essential* ingredient, without which Zechariah and Elizabeth are objects of pity and scorn; one *indispensable* ingredient, without which all the

others lose so much of their sweetness. They have no sons or daughters.

■ Verse 7a: **“But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren.”**

📖 **“Barren”** means *unable to bear children*. It is an ugly word with ugly synonyms: infertile; sterile; unproductive; fruitless; empty.

The word “barren” conjures up images of desolation: seared deserts and salt flats; frozen tundra; the Great Plains during the dust bowl years; ghost towns with tumbleweeds blowing down abandoned streets; toxic waste dumps; and garbage-strewn vacant lots.

Barrenness is always a heavy burden. But it gets heavier when just about everyone you know believes that motherhood is a woman’s fundamental reason for living. So “barrenness” is not merely Elizabeth’s reproductive status – in significant ways it defines her life, and that of her husband Zechariah.

Granted, they have had decades to come to grips with it. What was an open wound is now a scar. Their sharp pain has, for the most part, faded to a dull ache. Still... they have missed out on so much joy.

■ But all that begins to change in verses 8-22, when an angel announces to Zechariah {1:13, 17, NIV/NRSV}: **“Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.... he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”**

Elizabeth will give birth to Zechariah’s child, the baby will be a boy, and he will grow up to become a great prophet, a forerunner who will prepare Israel to receive the Messiah! It sounds too good to be true.

No wonder Zechariah asks, {1:18} **“How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years”!**

■ Yet {Lk 1:37} **“nothing is impossible with God.”** In verses 24-25 Elizabeth gets pregnant.

Even a young wife – one whose body is fertile and whose status does not depend on producing offspring, yet who desires to be a mother, is overjoyed to conceive.

Imagine, then, how jubilant Elizabeth is when her body begins to change! The natural joy that most women feel is for her exponentially increased, since her pregnancy ends decades of anxiety, disappointment, shame, frustration, and doubt. It is further multiplied by the revelation that her son will be an extraordinary man who with a mission of eternal significance.

Elizabeth bears ecstatic witness to God’s miraculous intervention, saying: **“The Lord has done this for me. In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.”**

■ Now we fast forward to Luke 1:39-45. Unbeknownst to Elizabeth, her young kinswoman Mary is also pregnant – only Mary is a virgin, the child within her has been conceived her by the Holy Spirit, and he is {Lk 1:36} **“the Son of God,”** {Mt 1:23} **“Immanuel ...**

‘God with us,’” and he {Mt 1:21} **“will save his people from their sins.”**

But Mary knows Elizabeth is with child. The angel Gabriel has told her, {Lk 1:36} **“Even Elizabeth... is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is [six months pregnant].”**

So Mary hurries off to the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Joy upon joy, when Elizabeth hears her cousin’s greeting,

the baby [leaps] in her womb, and [she is] filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she [exclaims]: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!”

■ Luke does not give as much attention to Zechariah. He has been silent, because when the angel Gabriel spoke to Zechariah he made him unable to speak because of his disbelief. But he shares Elizabeth’s joy, and when John is born, {1:64} **“his mouth [is] opened... his tongue [is] loosed and he [begins] to speak, praising God.”**

If God is able to give joy to a dried-up old woman and a skeptical old man, who learned to settle for disappointment and grief decades earlier, he can give joy

to us. If God is able to work through them to help bring joy to the world, he can work through us.

The narrative of Elizabeth and Zechariah reveals much about joy.

✪ 1st) Joy comes when God draws near to us and does his redemptive work on our behalf.

The LORD God is always present. Scripture makes it clear that is no place where he is not in existence.

Yet although God is always around everyone, he is not always near to everyone. Just as two people can be miles apart even in the same room, so we can be distant from God even though he is present.

In Luke 1 God drew near to Zechariah and Elizabeth. He entered their lives in a fresh new way. Not only so, he acted to redeem their empty years.

That is where life-transforming joy comes from.

✪ 2nd) Joy comes when we draw near to God and we receive his redemption.

We look for joy in money, possessions, social status, important work, friendships, and family life. Yet many people who are rich in wealth, fame, professional accomplishments, friends and family are poor in joy.

These can be blessings from the Lord, but they are inadequate to provide us with the fullest joy. We experience that when we respond to God’s goodness by drawing near to him and receiving the hope, peace, joy and love that only he can give.

In Luke 1 Elizabeth and Zechariah drew near to God by choosing trust, prayer, praise, and obedience.

They welcomed his redemptive work, not perfectly, but with a genuine heart of faith.

That is where life-transforming joy comes from.

✪ 3rd) Joy comes when we help others draw near to God and we participate in his redemptive work.

It does not require biblical faith, or even much natural wisdom, to discern that there is greater joy in sharing goodness than in hoarding it for oneself.

But how much greater is the joy of experiencing God's goodness, returning it to him in love and worship and obedience, and sharing it with others! It is no overstatement to say that until we share the joy of Christ with others and participate in his Kingdom mission, we ourselves have not fully received it.

In Luke 1 Elizabeth and Zechariah do this by parenting the forerunner of Jesus and witnessing to Mary and also their neighbors.

That is where life-transforming joy comes from.

Elizabeth and Zechariah's experiences were unique. Their story is not our story.

But what their story reveals about joy is true for everyone in every time and place: joy comes when God draws near and does his redemptive work on our behalf; joy comes when we draw near to God and receive his redemption; and joy comes when we help others draw near to God and participate in his redemptive work.

May we be people of real, deep, life-transforming joy!