

Advent Week 3: Songs of Joy

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KBF Sermon

December 15, 2019

The Gospel is the kind of thing that one can't read only once. Only when you get to the end of it can you understand the beginning of it.

-- Gil Baile --

The celebration of Advent is a beautiful thing. As we come to the end of the year we do so with a celebration of beginnings. In Church life we often talk about the death and the resurrection of Christ, and these are important parts of the Christian faith, but I love that quote from Gil Bailie. I love the idea that the mystery of Jesus is so deep that once you get to the end, you are encouraged to go back to the beginning so you can discover more of the beauty and significance in the life of Jesus Christ.

This year we began in week 1 considering 'Hope'. Specifically, the imagery in the vision of Isaiah that provided insights into how beautiful the restored Kingdom can be in the last days. There was a call! Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord. I hope you spent some good time thinking, reading and praying about how you might do that.

In week 2, Martha powerfully lead us through the theme of peace. The astonishing words of Mary who, in the face of the most inexplicable event in human history, with so much that could have been misinterpreted, was able to say, 'Let it be to me according to your will, oh Lord'. What brave and powerful words. Martha helped us reflect upon the circumstances in life when those words are almost too difficult to say and reminded us of how faithful God is.

To those who are currently facing trouble of many kinds, I hope that you have been able to come before the Lord and whisper, 'Come Lord, let it be according to your will.' And more than simply whispering those words, I hope that you have found the peace of the Lord that surpasses understanding. I hope that you have been able to rest in the provision of the Lord. Please know, you are not alone and we as a Church continue to pray and support you.

Who would think that all of this could be rolled up in the celebration of Christmas? Well, beyond the presents, the decorated trees, the lights on the houses, the family time and the feasting, beyond all of that Christ is the reason for the season so of course all of this is rolled into the Celebration of Christmas. Jesus Christ, the saviour of the world! How could it not be filled with tension, stress, longing and even pain. He came to bring hope and peace, amen?

Now though, is the 3rd Week of Advent, and on the third week of Advent we are encouraged to rejoice in the Lord. Joy is our theme for this week and we are going to move through Luke Chapter 1 and in particular look at two songs of praise and the joy with which they are inspired!

I hope that by the end of this message, you will be filled with joy and anticipation as we get ever closer to celebrating the birth of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Part 1: Two Doors

In the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, we are told two stories of an Angel appearing to a person. It has been described that these two appearances are like two sides of a double door and as you understand both you are opened to a powerful understanding of just how significant the birth of Jesus is.

These two appearances and the circumstances around them are deeply significant. They each contain an appearance of an angel which, in both cases, inspires a profound song. But, that is about where the parallels end. Let us consider them each in more detail.

Jerusalem

The first appearance takes place in Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish religion. We read in Chapter 1 verse 5 about a Priest who works in the temple. We are told that this priest, Zechariah, and his wife, Elizabeth, both come from important bloodlines. They have status and we are told that both Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in the eyes of the Lord. They followed the Lord's commands and were blameless.

There was one thing though. They were old, and they were childless.

One day, Zechariah is chosen to go into the holiest place in the temple where he is to conduct his duties as a priest which includes burning incense. All the other worshippers who were there were not allowed to go into this section of the temple. They remain outside, but in Zechariah goes.

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. 16 He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

This could be a convenient place for God to reveal that Jesus is coming. An upstanding and righteous man, who together with his wife has been praying for a child, a couple who are descendants of prominent families, who live in Jerusalem where the holiest temple of God is located.

It sounds like a repeat of the Abraham and Isaac story, it is almost too perfect! Could this be the messiah that was promised? No, this is going to be another boy. John will be his name and all of this, an angel appearing, is to mark how significant his job will be. To tell others

about the coming of Christ! To make ready a people prepared for the Lord. If this is the story about the person who will be telling us **about** Jesus, just wait until we get to the next appearing angel.

I digress. Getting back to the story, can I ask, how might you have reacted to this? Well, Zechariah didn't believe him. In the face of the angel he basically said, I am too old, my wife is too old, this is impossible. To which the angel replied;

I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 20 And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

And it was true. Zechariah came out from the temple and he couldn't speak. Imagine that. Having an experience like that, an angel comes to you, and you can't tell anyone about it?

When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

The Lord was being truthful and Elizabeth did become pregnant.

Nazareth

The Gospel of Luke then takes us approximately 100km north to the town of Nazareth. Here we are introduced to a young girl named Mary. Scholars estimate that she may have been as young as between the ages of 14-16. In her young age, she is betrothed to Joseph who is a descendant of King David. While Joseph has noble lineage, Mary does not and scholars are not certain of who her parents are.

But here in Nazareth, far away from the Holy City of Jerusalem, far away from the temple and the angel appears;

28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called h the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. 37 For no word from God will ever fail."

38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Firstly, how amazing that the angel would say to this young woman, 'Greetings you who are highly favoured'! What a beautiful way for an angel, a representative of God, to begin a conversation with a young woman.

But then, wow, what a burden to pass on to this young girl. She is going to have a son. But not just any boy, this is going to be the Son of the Most High! The Lord will give him the throne of his Father, David and his Kingdom will never end.

Maybe it is because I am a man, but I just can't help but think, 'That is A LOT of pressure!' I mean I want the best for Annie and I hope that I am a good Dad, but if an angel told me that Annie will one day be the Queen of the entire world and will have an everlasting kingdom... I might be wrapping her in bubble wrap before the clothes go on, do you know what I mean?

Mary though is not moved by this, instead, she is more concerned with the details. Angel, how is this going to work exactly?

Oh, really? And then from last week,

38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."

Part 2: The Doors Open

If each appearance of the angel is like a door, the next verses in Luke let us know that they are part of the same frame. In verse 39 the two stories come together.

39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, 40 where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! 43 But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

We are told that Mary goes to visit Zechariah and Elizabeth and what happens here is so tender and beautiful.

When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting, the Baby, John, leaps inside of her and this is the moment that the Holy Spirit comes upon Elizabeth.

In response Elizabeth makes a beautiful declaration about Mary and the child but then says this, *But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?*

And then declares; *"Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"*

I find it incredibly beautiful that these two women have come together. It seems to me that in their meeting, they both receive a confirmation of the promises that they have each been given. Elizabeth gets it. It all makes sense to her now and as she believes, the Holy Spirit fills her. The first people who believe, are filled with the spirit, and testify to the identity of the Lord are two women, a young and an old, who are being swept up in God's plan for their lives.

We on the outside, we know what will happen. We have read the Gospels, hopefully all four of them, and as I consider the intimacy of this moment with Mary and Elizabeth, I am overcome with emotion. On the one hand, I want to tell them just how amazing the lives of their two sons will be. I want to start telling them about profound each man will be and how, because of their obedience to God and incredible lives, they will be spoken about for thousands of years and they will be the reason why so many lives will be saved.

But I am also torn. I know how each man will be mocked, ridiculed and scorned. Worse than that, I know how each man will die and as I think about this moment I can't bear the fact that I know this information.

As I think about how much joy each of these women hold. As I think about how significant it is that God would choose to come into this world in the form of a newborn baby. Entrusting Jesus, God himself, as a newborn completely vulnerable into the care of Mary. As I think about all of this in this moment between these two women. I wish that I was reading it for the first time. I want to put aside all that I know about each man and I want to put aside all of my cares of this world and I want to take a moment and get lost in the intimacy and the joy of each of these women who are uncovering who their children will be. The one making way for the Lord, and the Lord himself!

In Luke chapter 1, you might get lost in how crazy and supernatural it sounds. You might think that the angels appearing are the most important and significant part. But I think they are just the doors that are flinging wide open so you can see this moment, the moment when the King is about to come in!

Psalm 24:7-9

Fling wide the gates,
open the ancient doors,
and the great king will come in.

8

Who is this great king?
He is the Lord, strong and mighty,
the Lord, victorious in battle.

9

Fling wide the gates,
open the ancient doors,
and the great king will come in.

Part 3: The Songs Pour Out

Coming back to the story, we have just seen how Mary's visit has helped Elizabeth to understand what has happened to them. Remember Zechariah could not talk. Maybe he wrote it all down for his wife to understand but now, thanks to Mary, Elizabeth fully understands.

And, beautifully, because Elizabeth now understands, her words are helping Mary to understand how powerful this baby will be. The Gospel of Luke is now going to show us Mary's response.

Mary's Song

46 And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

50 His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

55 to Abraham and his descendants forever,

just as he promised our ancestors."

In Mary's response there are as many as 15 references to passages in the Old Testament. Hannah's song - 1st Samuel 1:11, Miriam's Song - Exodus 15, Psalm 34:2, Isaiah 45:21, Genesis 30, Psalm 126:3, Psalm 111:9. As Mary's joy emerges, her song is connecting this blessing, the blessing of Christ, to moments of God's faithfulness in the Old Testament. Her song is a beautiful connector. It helps us to first see how impressive she is. She has memorized a LOT of scripture. But further than this, in light of God's faithfulness she declares "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

The Chapter could end here. We have covered a lot of ground. I hope you have enjoyed the story so far! After three months, Mary goes back home to Nazareth. But, before the chapter ends, we are going to return to the two characters where this story started.

Remember Elizabeth and Zechariah. Well, we followed Elizabeth and the scriptures showed us that beautiful moment between her and Mary but we haven't heard much about Zechariah yet. But at the end of the Gospel of Luke, we are invited into the moment when they have their child. Remember, **they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.**

And here we are 9 months later.

57 When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. 58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, 60 but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."

61 They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name."

62 Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child.

Poor guy! They have to make signs to him because the poor guy hasn't been able to talk for more than 9 months! Everyone expects him to say 'Zechariah' but,

63 He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John."

Imagine his emotion. The promise the Angel gave him has now come true and he cannot speak out to even name his child. His doubt has now been erased, he has the promise in his hands and so John is his name.

64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. 66 Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him.

And just like Mary, Zechariah sings;

**"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.**

**69 He has raised up a horn[c] of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David**

70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),

**71 salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—**

**72 to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,**

73 the oath he swore to our father Abraham:

**74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear**

75 in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
78 because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
79 to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

I could spend some time trying to tie this all together. I could focus on how the Joy of the Lord overflows, I could talk about the importance of trusting God’s promises. I could try and tie this together by talking about the joy of a promise fulfilled.

I could finish by bringing this back to the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve got kicked out for believing a lie. Here, rather than leading the man to believing a lie, the woman leads the man into believing the truth. Could this be the beginning of redemption?

I could try and tie this together by returning to the, ‘as it is according to your will.’ I could focus on the beauty of how God has continued to step out of heaven to attend to those he loves. There are so many different ways that this could go.

How should we finish today? All of you who know the ending to this story, the ending of the life, death and resurrection of Christ, perhaps the best way to end is to invite you back to the beginning. To invite you to consider the incredible events that happened before Christ was born and to consider the deep joy that came forth through each challenging situation.

And perhaps then, the best way to finish today is with Zechariah’s prayer for his newborn boy. This boy is here to tell the world about the one who is about to be born. As we celebrate this Christmas, as we celebrate the birth of the same boy who John the baptist was preparing the world for, might we be so bold as to pray these same words over ourselves, our families and our loved ones.

76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
78 because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
79 to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”

Benediction

Romans 15:13

13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

1	Message Title	Advent Week 3: Songs of Joy
2	Scripture Verses	<i>Luke 1: 46-55</i>
3	Verse for the Bulletin	<i>Luke 1:46-47</i>
4	Bio	<i>As previous</i>
5	Sermon Script	https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Qvaq925YR3d6l8iHQFR_-fqogXLPc8nmMrH4G1DhW1E/edit?usp=sharing
6	Benediction	Romans 15:13 13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.