



FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

BOWLING GREEN | WHERE FAITH & LIFE MEET



**FEAR
NOT**

“Fear Not: There Is Joy”

Luke 1:39-56

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Sermon Link: <https://bit.ly/3nhG2jF>

On an extraordinary night, in an ordinary-but-overflowing town, to ordinary people, God’s messenger appeared to pronounce joy. I’m willing to bet that the shepherds were ready to receive God’s message of joy that night. I bet you’re ready to receive God’s message of joy this day. I know I am. I’m ready to hear how the joy of the Lord is my strength to navigate these days (see Nehemiah 8:10)!

By the time we get to the Sunday of Joy in the season of Advent, we’ve gotten used to Christmas decorations. We’ve gotten used to Christmas music and Christmas movies and Christmas goodies. By this time, Christmas is in full swing. Cards are arriving in the mailbox, packages are arriving on the doorstep, and elves are appearing on shelves all throughout the land. You’d think we’d be happier, wouldn’t you?

Have you noticed that, by this time in the season, everybody’s just a little bit on edge? It tends to happen every year, but especially in 2020, people seem to be pretty unhappy. Just look around the next time you’re stopped at a traffic light. People might look Christmassy, but they don’t look happy. They look stressed. But the angel pronounced joy. How do we reconcile these things?

Happiness and joy are not the same things. We all want to be happy, but we’re not always happy. We all want to be joyful, and we can always have joy. What’s the difference? In a Christian context, I would differentiate between happiness and joy in this way:

Happiness lives on the surface of my life and is almost completely based on what I’m experiencing right now. Joy lives deep within me and is based on the eternal promises of God that are mine in Christ Jesus. Happiness depends on my circumstances; joy depends on my Savior. Happiness is fleeting, because my circumstances are always changing. Joy is eternal, because “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

The angel said, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people” (Luke 2:10). In the Greek, the word *joy* is *chara*, which is a cognate of *chairō* (“rejoice”) and *charis* (“grace”). *Chairō* means to rejoice because of grace; *chara* means to have joy because of grace. It all stems from God’s willingness to extend Himself toward us, to give us His grace.

Joy is always possible, because in Christ, God’s grace is always present. Here’s how that works practically...

Big Idea – Fear Not! There is joy in Jesus Christ.

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1. Joy begins with a miraculous encounter with Jesus (1:39-44).

³⁹ In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah,⁴⁰ and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, ⁴² and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" ⁴³ And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy (Luke 1:39-44).

Mary's relative Elizabeth had spent years struggling with infertility. As much as she and her husband Zechariah wanted to have a baby, it just didn't happen. Zechariah was a priest, so he lived his life close to God. There's no doubt his wife did, too. How many times did they seek God's favor in granting them a child? How many sleepless nights had they faced? How many heartbreaks did they endure? They had given up hope. Then God showed up. Do you remember the story?

Zechariah was serving as priest before God, and an angel of the Lord brought him a miraculous message:

Luke 1:13-17 - "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

God had a plan for Zechariah and Elizabeth—and for their baby they never thought they would have. God's timeline was different from what they had wanted, but God's plan was far greater than anything they could have expected. Now, she who had been called barren is early into her third trimester, and she is carrying the one who would "turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God" (Luke 1:16). In other words, John the Baptist was worth the wait, because God's plan was worth the wait.

Now Mary—who is bearing in her womb the Lamb of God—goes to visit Elizabeth, and another miracle occurs: John the Baptist leaps in his mother's womb in response to being in the presence of Jesus. The child being knit together by the hands of God in Elizabeth's womb rejoices in the presence of the child being knit together by the hands of God in Mary's womb. John the Baptist worships Jesus when both of them are *in utero*. Elizabeth joins in the chorus of worship by exclaiming to Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" (Luke 1:42). Elizabeth, herself experiencing a miracle from God, joins with her baby in worshiping the one who would be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

Have you noticed that Jesus always invokes a visceral response from people? Some people love Him, and some people hate Him, but no one is neutral toward Him. Once you have a true encounter with the Living Savior, you cannot be indifferent. Any encounter with Jesus is miraculous, and any encounter with Jesus presents the opportunity to dwell in joy.

Questions for Reflection / Discussion:

Why do you think people respond so differently but deeply to Jesus? What is your response to Him?

2. Joy grows in proportion to faith (1:45).

⁴⁵ *And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Luke 1:45).*

As Elizabeth pronounces worship of the Savior, she also notes that Mary is blessed as she embraces the message God has given her. Mary is blessed, because she believed. Mary’s joy is magnified in proportion to her faith in God. The same is true for everyone who trusts and follows Jesus.

The Apostle Paul writes to the church at Corinth that “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). Can you imagine how dreadful your life would be if all you had to build your life upon is what you are able to physically observe? That’s exactly how the majority of the world lives—simply reacting to what they are able to perceive in the moment. Everything they experience is framed within the context of the here-and-now, so their experience of life is shaped only by how good or how bad things are going in this moment. How does anybody make it?

I hear that question so many times, especially in the context of tragedy. Inevitably, in the face of the unimaginable, someone will ask me, “Pastor, how does anybody make it without the Lord?” My answer is always the same: “I have no idea.” As Thomas Chisholm wrote in “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” our faith in Jesus Christ gives us strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. How anybody navigates this world without God’s strength to persevere through the day and God’s hope that transcends what we experience in this world is beyond me. I’m glad we don’t have to.

The author of Hebrews defines faith for us at the beginning of Hebrews 11, the chapter that gives us the Great Hall of Faith: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). If we are in Christ, we are assured of that for which we hope—eternal life in Christ—and we are convicted of that which we cannot now see—the everlasting reward of dwelling forever with our Savior.

Put simply, this world is not all there is. This world is a relic of what God designed, marred inextricably by the Fall of Genesis 3. The Bible tells us that the creation itself groans under the ravages of sin and sin’s consequences, and we ourselves groan as we await the renewal of all things (see Romans 8:18-25). But for those of us who trust and follow Jesus, that’s just it—we *are awaiting the renewal of all things*. When we read passages like Revelation 21:1-5 as followers of Christ, we’re not just reading hopeful fiction; we’re peering into the reality that is coming...

Revelation 21:1-5 – ¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” ⁵ And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.”

Questions for Reflection / Discussion:

Do you ever think about the time described in Revelation 21 when all things are renewed? If you are in Christ, this is the reality that awaits you. How does that give you joy today?

3. Joy intensifies as we respond to God's goodness with worship (1:46-55).

⁴⁶ And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰ And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; ⁵² he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever" (Luke 1:46-55).

Mary responds to God's goodness with worship, pronouncing a beautiful song of praise to Almighty God that has become known as "The Magnificat" (based on the first line of her song in the Latin Vulgate translation of Scripture – *Magnificat anima mea Dominum*). Her song is similar in form to a Psalm of Thanksgiving, and by her words, Mary recounts with specificity the great work of God in her life.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" – God is my Savior, and in response to His great work in my life, the deepest parts of me cry out in adoration of Him.

"...for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name" – God has done great things for me. He has been gracious and merciful to me specifically.

"And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation" – God has not just done amazing things for me; He is willing to do amazing things for all who turn to Him throughout all generations. There's no limit to God's willingness to extend His grace to those who come to Him.

"He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty." – God is not impressed with the world's wisdom or the world's riches; He has wisdom and riches that are greater than anything this world can produce.

"He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever" – God is a promise-keeping God, and what is happening in me right now is the fulfillment of every promise God has ever made, for all the promises of God find their yes in the child I now bear (see 2 Corinthians 1:20).

Notice the degree of precision that Mary uses as she pronounces praise to Almighty God. Her pattern is intentional, and it's instructive. When we thank God explicitly and praise Him with specificity for all the amazing ways in which He has blessed us, we magnify His glory in amazing ways. We also remind ourselves of just how good God has been to us, and we stir within ourselves the joy of seeing God's mighty hand at work.

Questions for Reflection / Discussion:

How has God been good to you? How have you responded in praise and thanksgiving to Him specifically for what He has done in your life? How does responding with specificity and precision bless God, others, and you?

4. Joy is stirred within the community of those who believe (Luke 1:56).

⁵⁶ *And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home* (Luke 1:56).

When Mary arrived, Elizabeth was in her sixth month. Mary stayed three months, right up until Elizabeth was just about ready to deliver her son. What do you think those three months were like?

In all the Renaissance paintings of biblical characters and events, all of these moments are portrayed with a degree of holy sterility that makes them otherworldly and hard to identify with. Mary and Elizabeth often have haloes, and there's a sense that we normal humans just wouldn't be able to identify with them. But that wasn't the case at all. They were normal women experiencing the extraordinary work of God in their lives. I bet they filled their days with the things that normal women do when they are preparing to give birth.

When my wife was in her third trimester of pregnancy with our children, she was firmly in what many call the nesting phase. She was experiencing the overwhelming desire to prepare our home for the new baby. She had a strong urge to clean and organize and furnish and prepare, and she was kind enough to involve me in the process. I will never forget those days. They were so extraordinary and somehow so normal, all at the same time.

Elizabeth was in her third trimester when Mary arrived, and I bet she was firmly planted in the nesting phase. For three months, she and Mary navigated their pregnancies alongside one another, and I bet that as Elizabeth nested, Mary was both helping her and taking mental notes. What an extraordinarily ordinary time for them!

But even as they nested, I'm sure they built one another up. They inspired one another to love and good works. They encouraged each other. They loved one another. In short, I have no doubt that Mary and Elizabeth lived in Christ-centered community during those sacred days, and they stirred up joy within each other. That's how Christian community is supposed to work.

Final Thought

This world can be hard, and happiness can be fleeting. Jesus is faithful, and in Him, joy is always possible. As you navigate these days, don't forget to remember the difference between happiness and joy. Happiness lives on the surface of my life and is almost completely based on what I'm experiencing right now. Joy lives deep within me and is based on the eternal promises of God that are mine in Christ Jesus.

Happiness depends on my circumstances; joy depends on my Savior.

Happiness is fleeting, because my circumstances are always changing.

Joy is eternal, because "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

Feel free to pursue happiness, but don't forget that happiness is always relative. Choose to live in joy by focusing on your relationship with Christ and His work in your life—past, present, and future.