

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
December 7 & 8, 2013  
John & Laura Crosby  
REJOICE: Joy in Calling  
Luke 1:26-56**

[John Crosby:] As our team talked about what would make this Advent sermon series meaningful, it was clear that we thought because this story has been told so often, we often go on auto pilot. So we looked for ways to keep it fresh. The choir sings a different version of the *Magnificat* of Mary. We show a poem that none of us have heard that offers a different insight into Mary's life.

Each week we want to make Advent come to life and take the theme word for the whole Advent series and discuss that as well. Somebody suggested *rejoice* to which the response of one of the younger staff members was "Sounds pretty old-fashioned to me." Not wanting to give away any names, to the person who suggested *rejoice*, I said maybe it's not that the word is old-fashioned, it's that we have lost its meaning. I talked about William Willimon, the dean of the chapel at Duke, who said, "We need to teach people who come into churches a new language instead of giving it away." We need to talk about sin and salvation and sanctification and repentance but teach people what those words mean so they come back to life, otherwise you are just going blah-ba-blah, blah-ba-blah, blah-ba-blah. He said, "For heaven's sake, don't lose the words. You are teaching people the dialect of heaven."

So we stayed with *rejoice*, but it's important that we understand what that means, understand what the joy is that Mary supposedly experienced. Dallas Willard reminds us,

Joy is not pleasure . . . but a pervasive and constant sense of well-being. Hope in the goodness of God is joy's indispensable support.

As we began talking about joy this Advent, we started with Elizabeth and Zechariah. Today we want to look at the life of Mary. Protestants are often reluctant to talk about Mary. You know, somehow we'll get Catholic cooties or something. I grew up as a Catholic and I know better. Scot McKnight wrote a great book called *The Real Mary*, and he said that Protestants ought to study Mary because Protestants believe in the Bible and as Mary is in the Bible, we ought to study her life. He said Mary points to Jesus and as Mary learns about Jesus, we can learn, too. And one more reason I would add to what McKnight mentioned, we ought to hear Mary's story because the voices of women are not heard as often. We ought to hear the voices of what women say about the goodness of God.

I laugh about Protestants being reluctant to explore Mary and yet it's as close as my family. My wife is a recovering Baptist, and she has had that same experience with Mary. Yet, because it's in the Bible, Laura has learned all about Mary's story. I thought it would be good for us as we talk about joy and Advent to hear from somebody who has done that journey with us so I've asked Laura if she would share with you what God is teaching her about joy and Mary.

[Laura Crosby:] More than any other holiday, Christmas is a time when things are intensified. It's a time of more of everything. There's more laughter, more tears, more stress, more short tempers. It's a time of higher highs and lower lows. We have friends who are expecting their first baby in the next few weeks, a high high. But we also have a friend who is struggling with pancreatic cancer, a really low low. Some of you are experiencing a joyous Christmas because you have a job when you didn't last year or there will be someone sitting at your table this year who wasn't there last year. But for many of you, I know the opposite is true. It's a time of intense low because of hard circumstances. Maybe someone will be missing from your table for the first time this year.

What if you had a joy gauge on your soul? What would it register this morning? Would it register full, medium, empty, or somewhere in between? And how much would that joy gauge be dependent on the circumstances in your life this morning? We have a car issue in our family because I am very competitive. I want to drive our car until the gauge on the tank is lower than low. John doesn't like that so much. When it comes to joy, God does not want us to be driving on empty. Jesus said,

These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full [John 15:11].

We want to ask how we can have joy that is full in the midst of any circumstances, whatever they may be.

The account of Jesus' birth is absolutely my favorite. It is a time of stars and mystery and holiness and mess and God coming down to earth. I love it. It is a very familiar story and so as John said, even though as we're reading the words and they may be familiar to you, I hope that you will listen with fresh ears. Specifically this morning, we want to listen to the ways that Mary responds and how that brings joy into her life. We are going to start with Luke 1:26 and you can follow along on the screen. It says,

**26** In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, **27** to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. **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.

She continues this conversation with the angel and finishes saying,

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

We want to do a quick sketch of Mary. Here is a picture of how we often see Mary depicted. [Photo shown.] A 35-year-old, serene mother wearing clothes that would be fit for royalty back then. But this [photo shown] is probably a more accurate picture of what she might have looked like, even though I think she's a little too clean even in this picture. So, just a few things about Mary. She was young, maybe as young as 12 years old. If any of you have 12-year-old

daughters or grandchildren, can you imagine this happening to them? She was poor. Nazareth was a tiny town of about a hundred people, mostly farmers and shepherds. Third, she was a female, much less valued and respected than a male, so that's three strikes against her right off the bat.

When Gabriel came to Mary and told her she was going to have a child, this was not welcome news to her initially because she was engaged to Joseph but not married. In this culture, engagement was a legally-binding contract, like marriage, but she and Joseph were not living together, so no sex. This meant she would be an unwed, pregnant teenage girl, and she did not know at that point how this would turn out. This was not a friendly culture for such a thing. Joseph could reject her. And according to the Torah, someone in her condition was supposed to be stoned, so that could also happen to her. She didn't know. She had been visited by an angel, not your everyday, after school experience. She could have been labeled crazy by everyone around her. Somebody who was known to be pregnant before marriage would be the subject of rumors and ugly gossip and speculation. Nazareth was a small town. Easy for some angel to show up and say she was going to be blessed and then hightail it back to heaven. If she lived today, it would not be like she would be updating her Facebook profile with pictures of her expanding waistline. And not only was she pregnant, the child was to be the Messiah. This would bring danger from other kings. As it happened, there was one such king named Herod, who was not pleased to hear that another king had been born.

Some of you today are in pretty hard circumstances. Clearly, Mary was, too. Seemingly impossible, devastating circumstances. Maybe you're feeling that way, too. Think about what seem to be insurmountable circumstances in your life right now. Where do you feel out of control? How might you respond? You could scream, cry, swear, yell, throw things, run away, hide. You could drink Margaritas. You could hurt yourself. You could hurt somebody else. You could write angry emails. Maybe you have done some of these things but we want to look at ways Mary responded that enabled her to have joy even while in the midst of seemingly impossible circumstances.

**First of all, she remembered who she was.** She was favored, beloved, a servant.

**38** "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me according to your word" [Luke 1:38].

**48** . . . . From now on all generations will call me blessed . . . . [Luke 1:48].

This was the key to Jesus' life, too. Do you remember when He was baptized and God said,

**17** . . . "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased [Matthew 3:17]."

How do you think Jesus felt when He heard this? A voice from heaven saying, "You're my son. I love you." Jesus depended on God's acceptance because He would face massive human rejection.

The other night I was at a dinner for a friend, celebrating a combination of her birthday and an anniversary of sorts. Each of us who gathered there brought a word or words to share that would describe the value our friend had brought to our lives. There were words like *cherished* and *beautiful* and *effervescent* and more. Not all of us have the privilege of hearing words of

value and affirmation spoken over us by others, but God always wants to whisper His words of love into our lives. Joy starts with you hearing you are God's beloved child. Listen to that voice until it becomes second nature. We are fearfully and wonderfully made.

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made . . . [Psalm 139:14].

We are chosen. We are God's workmanship. We are accepted. We are forgiven. We are beloved.

[John Crosby:] So you hear that you are a beloved child of God, not a mistake and nothing can take that away. You feel joy-filled until Thursday morning. Then Thursday morning something comes up and you need to be reminded of what made you joyful. **Mary receives the gift of on-going joy when she leans into God's provisions for her.** God doesn't just send an angel and say it once. God kept giving her the recognition of joy, and His provision was Mary's cousin, Elizabeth.

**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 [Luke 1:39-40].

Elizabeth, her cousin, old woman, pregnant out of time.

**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

Blessed are you, Mary,

who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

God gave Elizabeth to Mary as a source of joy, a mentor, an encourager, somebody to just sit with her and say, "No, Mary, you are not crazy. Or at least, we're crazy the same way. You're not crazy." Laura loves the fact that the story says that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for the first three months of her pregnancy so that she would know that there was someone who understood when she started to gain weight. Somehow pregnant women seem to be upset by these silly little things like morning sickness or fatigue or hormones or crazy moods or eating. It may have been that God actually sent her away to save Joseph. Who knows? But God put some of Himself into Elizabeth and gave Mary joy.

Probably 22 or 23 years ago, Laura and I were new to this working together and leadership and we were going through a tough time. Nothing hugely wrong but we were tired of it and wondered if we had made a mistake coming here and if we had read God wrong. It was shortly before Christmas and we were trying to get our kids who were this big and this big to obey before dinner, and the doorbell rang. We went to the door and two of our friends were there, Bill and Joey. Bill, actually, was an elder in the church. They had this big basket and they walked inside and said, "We're just going to stay for a second" and pulled out a half-dozen kids' videos. The kids jumped all over those videos, ran to the TV, started it up, and they were set for the evening. Bill and Joey walked the basket into our kitchen and started to leave but we said, "No, no, stay.

Stay. Just for a minute.” Well, that minute turned into an hour or hour and a half. They had filled the basket with all these gourmet foods that a young couple never got to eat, and we just kept pulling things out and eating and having a great time, laughing together and telling stories. They didn’t lecture us. They didn’t pray for us. They loved us and made us feel like we were God’s children and 22 years later, I’m still basking in that enough to tell you the story.

Who has God put in your life to remind you that God is faithful and keeps His promises? Well, the other side of that is, who is it that you need to be Elizabeth for? Who do you know who is doubting and needs encouragement? God in you can be God *with* somebody else. Mary knew that she was beloved and was reminded of it by the community that God gave her.

[Laura Crosby:] **Lastly, and I think maybe most importantly, joy became real because Mary remembered who God is.** I believe there are two different ways we can approach life, how we can interpret the stuff of life. Bottom up or top down. If we have a bottom-up mentality, we start with the circumstances in our lives and we project onto God. If our lives are good, then God must be good. If our lives are bad, then God must be bad.

If we have a top-down mentality, we start with faith in the character of God. God is good and sovereign and loving, and so even though we may not see the end of the story, even though we may not understand,

28 . . . we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him . . . .  
[Romans 8:28].

We trust that we are safe in His hands. That doesn’t mean that we are not honest with Him but we trust in the end that God is *with us* and God is good. This was Mary’s interpretation. She had a top-down faith.

This next section we are going to read is called the *Magnificat*, from the Latin word for magnifies. “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Everybody magnifies something. It’s just part of being human. If we magnify something, we give it an extraordinarily large place in our lives. Your mind wanders to it when you are not thinking about anything else. Your desires are shaped around it. Your identity gets tied to it. Your joys and sorrows are all wrapped up in whether you are getting more of it or less of it. An alcoholic magnifies the bottle. A workaholic magnifies success. Some of us magnify money. Some of us magnify sex or approval or security. We all magnify something. Mary magnified the Lord. This is familiar, but I would encourage you to listen to how Mary responds and what you see of God in this. Verse 46,

**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."

For me, this is the crux of Christmas, *God with us*. God came down to be *with us* in the mess and the muck of our lives, to walk with us and die for us so that we can be with Him forever and He can be with us forever. God is personal and He is crazy about us. Mary really knows God! All the Scripture she quotes in this section is really a big deal! She was a girl and wouldn't have been able to study it. She was surely illiterate. The Scripture that she has been quoting would have been written on scrolls kept at the synagogue. She could have heard it by listening in on the fringes. A number of scholars have suggested that Mary probably had memorized all of the psalms. Her mind is immersed in this.

Mary really gets what it means when the angel says, "God is with you." It's not like the angel is saying, "Joe Schmo is with you" or "Barack Obama is with you" or Mother Teresa. Mary knew what we need to learn. Joy isn't dependent on what is happening to us in this season but who is *with us* in it all. Emmanuel, *God with us*. Joy come down to earth.

So how are we going to rejoice in a way that isn't all fakey-like? Like, "Praise the Lord, my dog died." One person who exemplified this for John and me was my grandmother whom we admired more than anyone. She was an amazing woman of faith who did everything around the church. As she grew older, she learned that she was going to be going completely blind. She didn't just brush over it. She acknowledged that it was going to be hard for her but she knew she served a God who is bigger than her circumstances. She, like Mary, trusted Him. She said, "I'm going blind and that's really hard but I have a nice phone voice. Maybe I could call people who have visited the church and welcome them." Joyful people don't deny the dark; they just never stop looking for God's light everywhere in everything.

Joy comes when we know who we are, when we know we are beloved. It comes when we lean into God's provision of our companions and encouragers and, most importantly, when we remember the character of God, who is *with us*. One of the things we talked about as we were preparing this series was the fact that during this season, it can be so hectic. There can be so much noise and so many voices in our lives. We wanted to provide some space for you to reflect and some time for you to just think about God. I hope this will be a gift to you as we close. I am going to ask a couple of my friends from Student Ministries to come up here. One of them will be speaking thoughts that maybe many of you have had as you came into the sanctuary this morning, and the other will be speaking God's Word from Scripture. I am going to invite you to close your eyes and open your hands and just listen in silence as God speaks into your story.

[Girl No. 1:] I don't think anybody understands what is going on in my life. Does God even care?

[Girl No. 2:]

**28** Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom [Isaiah 40:28].

**30** As for God, his way is perfect: The LORD's word is flawless; he shields all who take refuge in him [Psalm 18:30].

[Girl No. 1:] I'm afraid, afraid that I'll mess up again or disappoint others. Where *are* You, God?

[Girl No. 2:]

**10** . . . do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. [Isaiah 41:10].

. . . . I will never leave or forsake you [Joshua 1-5].

[Girl No. 1:] Sometimes it feels like nothing is ever going to change and I'll be left all alone.

[Girl No. 2:]

**6** For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace [Isaiah 9:6].

**38** . . . nothing can ever separate us from his love. Death can't, and life can't. The angels can't, and the demons can't. **39** . . . nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. [Romans 8:38-39].

[John Crosby:] Remind us of that, Lord Jesus. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*