

Text: Luke 1:39-45

Date: 12 December 2021 (Advent III)

Title: Laughter and Longing

Series: The Gifts of Advent: The Gospel of Luke

For: Community CRC, Kitchener, ON

The last we heard of Elizabeth was right after Zechariah's encounter with the angel in the temple.

Her husband returned to her without a voice and with bright and bewildered eyes, tears on his face, and he hugged her so hard when he came through the front door. He held onto her like a man hugging the ground after being at sea for too long.

And when Zed was finally able to communicate what happened and what he was told...well, Elizabeth finally understand her ancestor Sarah's laughter at the back of the tent when her husband encountered an angel and heard the same kind of news:

You will give birth to a baby.

That longed for bundle of joy you had given up hope on.

It's yours.

And just like Sarah, Elizabeth laughed.

Laughed in the midst of bewilderment and confusion

Laughed after long years of sorrow and longing and pain

Laughed with unexpected joy and maybe fear that it's all too good to be true

But then the promise of the Lord was fulfilled. She felt life in her body. And this post-menopausal, pregnant woman declares:

The Lord has done this for me.

In these days, he has shown his favour

and taken away my disgrace among the people.

But then, after years of hurt and shame as her friends and family and neighbours grew their households and had children, raised them up and welcomed their children's children into their homes in their old age, even as she says her disgrace has been taken away, Elizabeth pulled away from her community.

Luke tells us earlier in the chapter that Elizabeth locked herself away in the first months of her pregnancy.

Was she embarrassed of her pregnant elderly body?

Was she fearful of the words of others?

The well-intentioned but hurtful remarks others make about situations out of the ordinary?

I wonder what their home felt like in those early months. Old Zed unable to talk. With their door firmly closed to their neighbours and family. Elizabeth watching as her belly grew.

Maybe she held her breath every morning until she felt her son's kick.

Maybe she had to work each day to trust that this was truly real.

And so she kept to herself. As her baby grew day by day in a quiet little house in the hill country of Judea.

Until one day, the front door bursts open and Elizabeth, too pregnant to get up quickly, hears a familiar voice yelling her name and at the sound of the greeting, she has to sit down again because her son kicked so hard it took her breath away.

And in rushes her cousin, Mary. With the same bright and bewildered expression that Zed had the day he lost his voice. Their eyes meet. The young one and the old. And Elizabeth knows. And she laughs. At what the Lord has done. At her young cousin and the part she is to play. And at the feeling of her son moving in her body.

And Elizabeth breaks the silence of the house, breaks the silence of the past months, and fills the house with words of blessing and overwhelming joy:

Oh, Mary! How blessed are you among women, and how blessed and precious is the child you bear! But, dear one, why am I so favoured that the mother of my Lord should come to me? Yes. I know. I just know in my bones. As soon as I heard your voice, I knew. My son even leaped for joy in my body! I know what the Lord has done!

And then Elizabeth through laughter and tears pronounces her own beatitude on the two of them:

Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord will fulfill his promises to her!

And the quiet little house in the hill country of Judea fills with the presence of the Holy Spirit as these two women share their stories of joy.

I'm always amazed at this small and tiny gem of a story tucked between angelic appearances and cosmic happenings at the beginning of Luke's gospel. It doesn't really need to be here, does it?

The birth announcements have happened and all that really needs to happen next are the births of the promised sons. Their mothers do not need to meet. And we certainly don't require an account of the meeting to get the gist of the major story beats. Luke could have gone straight from the end of the angel appearing to Mary in verse 38 to Elizabeth giving birth to John in verse 57. He could have even kept Mary's famous song as her response to the angel.

This small and tiny story does not really need to be here from a story perspective. An editor might have said to Luke, you can cut this part out, we wanna get the reader to the juicy bits anyway. But this story remains.

A small and seemingly insignificant aside about two pregnant mothers.

A small and seemingly inconsequential moment sandwiched between much more dramatic and extraordinary actions.

Except that God led these two to each other. Their meeting is not accidental to Luke's story, to God's unfolding plan, or to each of them.

When Mary expresses bewilderment about how she's supposed to be pregnant while still a virgin, the angel reveals to her that Elizabeth is also pregnant when she shouldn't be. The angel gives Mary the story of Elizabeth as a sign that no word from God will ever fail.

And so, knowing Elizabeth's story, Mary rushes off to visit her. This is no quick trip across town or down the street. Elizabeth lives in the hill country of Judea. About 100 kilometres away. A four day journey with good weather. But she gets ready, packs her bags, and travels kilometre by kilometre until she arrives at Elizabeth's front door. Unannounced. Unexpected.

Why does Mary rush off to Elizabeth? Some theologians speculate that it shows a lack of faith on Mary's part. That the words of the angel weren't enough for her. She had to see with her own eyes the miracle of Elizabeth's pregnancy in order to accept the impossibility of her own.

But I think it's something else. Mary is human enough to seek confirmation of the impossible words of an angel appearing to her. I don't consider that lack of faith on Mary's part.

What makes her pack up and journey to Elizabeth, and burst through Elizabeth's front door, is her deep and overwhelming joy. Mary needs to share that with another person who won't dismiss her, or disbelieve her, but who will enter into her joy. Who will understand it. Who will celebrate with her.

And Elizabeth needs that too.

Shut up in her home, front door closed, Elizabeth needs to share that joy. Hers. Mary's. And so God leads them to each other. To the profound sharing of their stories of joy. Stories made possible by what the Lord has done for them.

We need each other's stories of joy, too.

To encourage each other with those times in our own stories where we can see the hand of God so clearly as to declare like Elizabeth: "The Lord has done this for me!"

To share our stories with others who won't dismiss them or disbelieve them, but who will enter into our joy with us.

To serve as signs to one another of God at work in our world, in our lives, and in our stories.

And as the Holy Spirit filled that little home in the quiet hill country of Judea, the Holy Spirit comes to strengthen and encourage us and each other us through our own shared stories of joy.

One little detail often gets overlooked, lost in-between Mary's song and Elizabeth giving birth to her son:

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months.

We witness their initial greeting and joy but their time together was longer than a quick conversation at the kitchen table. Mary and Elizabeth cared for one another. Supported one another. For three months. Bringing Elizabeth to full term with her son. And Mary to the point where she would start showing and returned home unable to hide her pregnancy. Unable to hide from the comments and judgement of others who would not understand the joy of what the Lord had done, but only the shame and the scandal.

God led them to each other so that their stories of joy could sustain them for what lies ahead.

We know how their stories go.

Mary will see her beloved boy die like a criminal on a cross. And Elizabeth, if she lived long enough, would see her longed for and promised child murdered by a corrupt and cruel government leader.

Both these women will endure loss and pain in the years ahead. Their stories of joy, the strength that came from sharing them with each other, and the sustaining presence of God in their midst would point them to God's faithfulness even when their stories turned dark.

Because all of our stories of joy are not ends in themselves, but signs to us, to each other, and to the world, of the joy that is promised at the end of the story.

The joy that Elizabeth's son prepared his people to receive.

The joy that's proclaimed in heaven and to earth in a manger in Bethlehem.

And the joy that's anticipated when that beloved boy of Mary's returns to make his blessings his flow far as the curse is found.

May we remember and believe that in Jesus, our Emmanuel, all of our stories - the joyful parts and the hard ones - find their meaning and end in God's one joyful, unfolding story of redemption.

May the Holy Spirit sustain us in our laughter and in tears as we wait for that promised return of our Emmanuel and trust that our God is a God who keeps his promises.

And may Elizabeth's blessing spoken over her and Mary be true for all of us:

Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord will fulfill his promises to her.

Let us pray....