

“Rejoicing in a Weary World: Making Connections”

Luke 1:26-45

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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine

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This morning we continue exploring our theme “Rejoicing in a Weary World.” As I mentioned last Sunday, from now until Christmas we will be reading through the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke. Of all the gospels Luke is the one who tells us the most about the birth of not only Jesus but of his cousin John the Baptist. But before we get to their actual births, we have the backstories and drama surrounding their birth announcements. If you remember, last Sunday we heard the surprising announcement the angel Gabriel makes to the old priest Zechariah - while he is serving in the temple he gets the surprising news that his barren and elderly wife Elizabeth will have a son. Just as God blessed Abraham and Sarah with a child in their old age, so, too, will they have a child who will prepare the way of the Lord. Having been worn down by many years of disappointment and even shame for not having a son, Zechariah is not able to believe. “How can I be sure of this? My wife and I are very old” (1.18). And because of his lack of trust he is not able to speak during the entirety of Elizabeth's pregnancy. After his time in the temple, Zechariah does return home and soon we learn that wife Elizabeth indeed becomes pregnant. For the first five months she stays in seclusion by herself. But unlike Zechariah she is able to say, “This is the Lord's doing. God has shown favor to me by removing my disgrace among other people” (1.25). Let us turn now to today's passage, the story of Gabriel, Elizabeth and Mary.

**Luke 1:26-45**     *Common English Bible*

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. When the angel came to her, he said, “Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!” She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said, “Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom.”

Then Mary said to the angel, “How will this happen since I haven't had sexual relations with a man?” The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God's Son. Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled ‘unable to conceive’ is now six months pregnant. Nothing is impossible for God.” Then Mary said, “I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, “God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she

who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Last Sunday I began by asking you to consider what it is in your life that is making you weary - not just tired physically, but it could be a weariness of carrying an emotional burden alone. Or there could be a relationship or situation in your life that brings pain, anxiety or even dread. Whatever may be causing you weariness during this time of Holiday Cheer, the first step is to acknowledge it. Instead of avoiding it or pretending it is not there, we are called to turn towards our weariness - to acknowledge it, even to embrace it. Such honest self-awareness is our first step if we want to experience true joy, the type of joy that is a fruit of the Spirit, joy that is not dependent on our current circumstances - the type of deep joy that is a gift from God. Today's theme is making connections. As humans created in the image of God, we are called to be in loving relationship with ourselves, our creator and with others. True joy is not something we can experience in isolation - it is something that is shared in connection with others. I might find pleasure in playing a game on my phone or reading a book in my bed, but joy comes in the sharing - in the connections we make with one another.

Speaking of connections, when we turn to our gospel passage this morning, it's easy to see Luke is trying to connect two things: the story of John's birth announcement to Zechariah and Elizabeth, and now the story of the angel Gabriel bringing a surprising announcement to Mary. It's hard not to compare these two birth announcements. The pattern is similar - Gabriel shows up out of nowhere, announces surprising news of a birth to come, including the name of the child to be born. Gabriel then gives details about the child - John, with the spirit and power of Elijah, will turn the hearts of parents back to their children, and make ready a people prepared for the Lord (1.17). Jesus will be even greater! He will be called the Son of the Most High God, he will be given the throne of David and his kingdom will have no end (1.32-33). And when Gabriel shows up out of nowhere, both Zechariah and Mary are startled and afraid - and who can blame them! While Zechariah's reaction to Gabriel is described as fearful, Luke uses an even stronger version of the same word to describe Mary when she hears Gabriel's announcement" (Raj Nadella, [Working Preacher, 12-24-2023](#)). She is greatly troubled, and who could blame her? As a young girl, probably just 12 or 13 years old, her family had arranged her to be engaged or betrothed to Joseph - during this time of engagement Mary would live with her parents, not Joseph, so the news of her pregnancy could jeopardize her marriage - something that had financial and social implications for her and her family. We can imagine what may be going on in her head: "Does the Lord know how young I am?" "I haven't even been married yet and NOW I am pregnant? What kind of good news is this??" (Cecelia D. Armstrong, "How Does a Weary Word Rejoice" sermon guide). Gabriel gives it his best effort as a messenger: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God! The son you will conceive will be great, he'll be called the Son of the Most High; he will have David's throne forever and ever (cue Handel's Messiah!!) But Mary isn't going to buy it! "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" Gabriel then mentions it will be the work of the Holy Spirit, truly a miracle.

But while Gabriel goes on and on with these grand pronouncements, about how favored Mary is, how her baby will be from the line of David and called the Son of God, none of these things really reassure her or help her to get over her anxiety. Remarkably, it is only when she hears that her relative Elizabeth is pregnant - it is only then does Mary say, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said." **You see, Mary found the assurance she needed through a connection.** New Testament scholar Raj Nadella puts it like this: Mary is convinced to trust God only when she has "the assurance that another woman, someone she knew well, would walk with her during this uncertain journey. Elizabeth likely understood Mary's predicament more than anyone else, and it was *the prospect of a shared experience* that mattered to Mary more than any of those grand promises from Gabriel" (Raj Nadella, [Working Preacher, 12-24-2023](#)). It's the possibility of this connection, this shared experience that causes Mary to leave with haste, traveling from her town of Nazareth in the region of Galilee - all the way down to Elizabeth and Zechariah's home thought to be just outside of Jerusalem. While we know this would have been a difficult journey of about 80 miles, quite a distance in those days, we don't know much else. Did Mary go alone? Did she tell her parents or even Joseph what was going on?

Luke tells us that when Mary arrives it's the 6th month of Elizabeth's pregnancy - no doubt she is showing, and so Mary can be reassured that what the angel has told her is true. Nothing is impossible with God! The elderly Elizabeth has indeed conceived a child! But quickly the focus turns to young Mary and the baby she is carrying - John leaps in Elizabeth's womb for joy, and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit! She is able to confirm Gabriel's message, that God has truly blessed Mary above all women, and blessed the child she is carrying. The journey for connection has been worth it - young Mary's joy is confirmed by her older relative. And it is young Mary, the one who has no status, no credentials at all - she is the one who has been chosen by God to bring the Savior into the world. We can become so familiar with this story that we lose a sense of how difficult it really was for these two women. Having a child late in life is never easy - Elizabeth had plenty to worry about during her pregnancy. Young Mary faced the uncertainty of how her family and her husband-to-be would accept her situation. We are told in verse 56 that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months, so we can only imagine that the connection these two shared was very important to both of them.

**In a weary world where there are so many things unknown, so many things that could go wrong, so many things that are wearing us out, Elizabeth and Mary give us a roadmap to joy.** These remarkable women show us the way, that we need to move out of our isolation and seclusion (remember, Elizabeth did that for 5 months!) and move towards one another. As an introvert I could easily see myself greeting Mary, welcoming her for a couple of days, and then sending her back home. Surely she needed to figure this out with her fiancé Joseph! Surely her parents would be worried! But that's not the choice Elizabeth and Mary make. Instead, they chose to stay connected to each other. And in their connection they find the way to rejoice. The witness of the Bible is clear- true joy is found not in isolation but in connection with one another. When we connect with each other - having a telephone conversation, swapping letters, sharing a cup of coffee or even just a text with someone we have not seen in a while - when we make these connections we can be reminded

of our common humanity. “You know, I have struggles in my life and other people have them, too!” Though there’s a myth in our culture (especially strong for men) saying we need to be tough and independent, a lone ranger who figures it out by themselves, the way of the Spirit actually moves in the opposite direction. **When we have the courage to face our own vulnerabilities - to be honest with ourselves about the weariness we are carrying - when we are able to do this ourselves, we can then find the courage to turn to others.** Even though I may feel alone in whatever I am going through, the truth is that I am never alone. As part of the human family we all go through so many of the same things, and the amazing claim of Christianity is that in Jesus God has become one of us - experiencing the depths of human life - the highs and the lows. Even in our darkest hours God is with us, present in a real way. And that is why connections are so important.

This fall I started watching the BBC drama series Call the Midwife. The TV show is set in the middle of the 20th century in England, and it follows the lives of midwives who are busy around the clock delivering babies. Many of the births are to families who are struggling in poverty, and each episode features a new challenge or circumstance. A recent episode ([season 4, episode 5](#)) I watched on Netflix reminded me of the weariness carried by those who are caregivers, those who try so hard to help others but are not able to do it all. While all the nuns and midwives are female characters, Dr. Turner is the show’s male physician, a hard working veteran of WWII who marries one of the midwives and still suffers from the affects of PTSD. After Dr. Turner makes a near fatal mistake, misdiagnosing a rare bone disease in a baby, he is not able to carry on with his work. Exhausted, stressed out and on the edge, Dr. Turner is ordered by his wife to rest at home til he feels better. “What about the patients? I’m letting them down!” He has a hard time forgiving himself and lays in bed for days. If you wondered what a weary soul looks like, it can be seen in veterans like the one portrayed by Dr. Turner. And I believe no amount of rest or isolation can bring joy to the weary soul. It has to come from somewhere else. We see this truth come alive near the end of the episode. Unbeknownst to him, Dr. Turner’s wife began collecting cards and letters, cakes and cookies - all sent to him by some of his former patients, including kids he helped to deliver. I believe joy comes to his weary world when the doctor is surprised to discover these gifts in the living room one morning. Dr. Turner’s teenage son had kept a list of all the gifts, and he begins sharing some of the details with his dad. “The Patterson family sent you a pack of tea - said they wished they could do more after what you did for their daughter Ida.” And on and on the list goes. In the next scene we see the doctor return to his work, helping to save a woman who is suffering from diphtheria. He has been given a new lease on life.

You see, it wasn’t the cards and notes and presents that changed the doctor’s weariness - no, it was the connections they represented. Through our connections with others we are reminded time and time again that we are never alone! And through the eyes of others we are able to remember who we are - God’s Beloved children - cherished and loved, forgiven and free to be a blessing to the whole world. As your pastor my prayer is that you find the connections you need to continue on this journey of life, trusting that God’s favor is shining down on each of you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.