

Joy Through the Eyes of God

December 23, 2012

Shepherd's Grace Church

Luke 1:39-56

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." ⁴⁶And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." ⁵⁶And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home. (Also Read Micah 5: 1-5a)

We will enter His courts with thanksgiving in our hearts, we will enter his courts with praise! We will say this is the day that the Lord has made! We will rejoice for He has made us glad! The psalmist goes on to say, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord all you lands!" (Psalm 100) Indeed we are called to be joyful! We are called to give praise to God in all things and we say together, "God is good all the time," and "All the time God is good!" Then we step back. We look around at the world and we wonder. As we look at the evening news we hear stories of death, destruction, devastation and we begin to doubt. The world does not seem to be good all the time, and all the time, the world does not seem to be good! How can a good God allow such a ghastly world? What is the world to do? What are we to do? We are only one small congregation! You are only one person! How can we rejoice? How can we even overcome? What does it mean to see joy "Through the Eyes of God?"

I believe this is exactly where the passage from Micah draws us into God's word this morning! Do we not seem surrounded, under siege from every side from bad news in our world? As we listen to the events of the day, day after day, do we not seem small and insignificant? Micah writes to just such a people as us. He writes to a group who has witnessed corruption in its leadership, irresponsibility in its government, and rejection of its core values! Micah writes to a group who feel helpless in the midst of a

seemingly hopeless situation! He says to them, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

Even though this people might think they are insignificant and largely unnoticed, there will be even a fragment from them that will rise up and make a difference. There will be a fragment that determines the future of their nation. Abraham Lincoln once said, "Never doubt that a small group of individuals can overcome in our great nation and accomplish purposes beyond their means! Do you know why? Because it is the only thing that ever has!" Small groups are where ideas are born! Small groups are where plans are made! Small groups are where leaders emerge from! It is not only true of nations, it is true of churches! Look at the way the name "Shepherd's Grace Church" emerged from our midst. Small groups offered suggestions that allowed for other suggestions until eventually, a word came forth! I believe part of it was even offered by those who were among the youngest in our midst, by those who seemed insignificant to others but who had a mighty voice in our future!

Each week, a small group gathers here to feed the hungry! There are usually only four or five, but they find help! College students come in occasionally...sometimes volunteers from other parts of the community bring food, and they serve! They humble themselves and serve! For four years they have served every Thursday night...through holidays, through weather, through limited resources...and to date, they have served over two hundred evenings and well over ten thousand people. You are small "O Shepherd's Grace," O Bethlehem (Which is translated from Hebrew, House of Bread) but out of you will come something great! joy

Does Micah mean the Messiah will come from the midst of Shepherd's Grace Church? No! But Micah does mean that we as a small group in the midst of great difficulty are not insignificant, we are not inconsequential! We can, we will be a force in the world if we are willing to continue to make a joyful noise to the Lord! How can we do that? What does joy look like through the Eyes of God? In chapter 6 of Micah, we find these words: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6.8)

Joy through God's eyes comes with our willingness to seek Him out and do His will. Our name, our mission, our work are nothing unless we first acknowledge that these things belong to Him! As we think about this today, we must be humbled. Even after we served a large number of people at "Shepherd's table on Thursday, there were some who came on Friday and worked to make our place of worship an even better place. They did not seek recognition or glory for themselves, but a rather, a place more suitable for us together to do the work God is calling us to do! Joy through God's eyes comes as we look past our own needs and begin to put the needs of others first. In the days and weeks ahead, we will see a new fellowship hall, a new youth room, new restrooms, new sinks and fixtures designed not for our comfort, but for our service to this community!

The work we saw this accomplished this morning was a surprise to most! Did you notice the new sign outside as you arrived? Another surprise! A Christmas gift of memorial, a dedication to two in our congregation who have gone on to eternal worship, but who through the generosity of their families continued in service! This element of surprise is an exhibit of joy through God's eyes! In fact, surprise is an essential element of God's joy! The people of Bethlehem would have been surprised to learn that God was going to bring a great gift from them for all of Israel but two thousand years later, we look back and know what that gift was! What are the great gifts God is bringing from us? We have named a few, but I believe the greatest are yet to come! From out of our midst there will come pastors, leaders, servants willing to make a difference in the world, not because of what they see, but because of what God sees in them! God will use these servants to accomplish His will. That is exactly what Micah is telling us this morning and that is exactly where Micah meets Luke's Mary!

In the verses immediately preceding our lesson for today, a messenger has come to Mary. The messenger has told her that her relative, Elizabeth, would be pregnant with a child! Elizabeth was old and thought to be barren. Surprise! The messenger has also told her that she, herself would bear a child who would be the "Son of the Most High" and who would sit on the throne of David. Mary was a virgin. Surprise! How could this happen? With humans it could not, but not so with God. For with God, nothing is impossible! (Luke 1: 37) Surprise!

Mary could have doubted the will of God. She could have protested the will even as her relative Zechariah did earlier in the chapter. Remember Zechariah, for his protest, for his lack of faith, he was silenced by God! He was a high priest and yet he could not believe God could do what he had been unable to do! As we approach Christmas, it is important for us to get our priorities right. What we have, what we give, what we are comes not from our own abilities. The gifts given to our church this past week were by the work of people, but make no mistake, they were gifts from God, from a God for whom nothing is impossible! Unless and until we recognize this, we cannot, we will not realize the fullness of the ministry God has for us!

Mary understood this! She bowed her head and said simply, "Let it be done to me, according to the will of God!" Surprise! Surprise is an essential element of God's joy. Think about the best Christmas you have ever had. It can be one from when you were a kid and you wanted something really badly. I remember a few of those, Christmases when I had asked for something I really wanted and I actually got the gift! What joy filled my heart on those Christmas mornings! Surprise! But the memories that produce even greater joy for me now are the moments we were able to give those gifts, those gifts we knew our children really wanted, those gifts that were just perfect for them, to our own kids!

I can still close my eyes and remember the looks of wild eyed excitement on Erin and Amanda's faces in those years when we absolutely nailed the gift! I can remember the tears of joy streaming down their faces and the looks of love cast, first at the gift and then finally our way! I can remember the same looks

on Kenton and Broderick's faces in the years we have been able to give those same kinds of gifts with them! I can remember their excitement and exuberance as they found what they wanted most and as they wrapped their arms around their mom and hugged her! Surprise! Joy through God's eyes offers surprise and invites him into the middle of the celebration into the middle of the tears, into the middle of the hugs, into the middle of our lives!

I can imagine that same look, that same reaction in Mary's eyes as she realized the gift given her by her Heavenly Father! I can imagine the wild eyed excitement, the prospect of great joy and hope, the prediction of an incredible future for a child she would bring into the world! Surprise! But wait...I can also imagine that at some point a reality set in with Mary's gift. As with any great gift, there comes great responsibility! Mary would now be a mother, but an unwed mother. What kinds of implications would that have for her relationship with Joseph to whom she was betrothed? What kinds of implications would that have with her parents? What kinds of implications would that have with her community, with her synagogue? Surprise!

At some point in receiving God's gift, the worldly reality would have undoubtedly set in with Mary. She would likely be one of the statistics on the six o'clock news. Teen pregnancy on the rise. News of another one in Nazareth! Mary however would not be in Nazareth. Immediately she left to learn more not about the criticism she would undoubtedly receive, but of the Gift God has miraculously given! Mary travels out from Nazareth into the Hills of Judea and there she enters the house of her relative Elizabeth. In Elizabeth's house, Mary learns four things.

First, Mary learns obedience. Obedient--For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, just as he delighted in prospering your ancestors, ¹⁰when you obey the Lord your God by observing his commandments and decrees that are written in this book of the law, because you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.(Deuteronomy 30: 9-10) Mary does not question as Zechariah did, but rather she accepts. She is obedient and in her obedience, she understands her new prosperity. What she is given in God brings her great joy because she turns totally to the Lord! Sometimes God gives gifts that seem inappropriate to us at the time, teen pregnancy, untimely pregnancy, additional financial burdens, obligations of service even on our days off! All of these things can seem like a huge inconvenience. Some of them are even gifts given from what we might call bad choices. Surprise! God will use all of them for his good for those who will love and obey him from generation to generation! His mercy will be to them!

Second, Mary learns to overcome. Overcoming--With joy they celebrated the festival of unleavened bread seven days; for the Lord had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel. (Ezra 6: 22) When Elizabeth responds with a blessing, Mary knows that whatever obstacles may be in front of her, the Lord has already gotten behind her! Elizabeth has experienced the possible action of an impossible God and

she now recognizes God is at work again. In her reaction, she affirms that God is for Mary and if God is for us, who can be against us! Through Elizabeth's blessing, Mary is given confidence by God that she can overcome. How do we react when people come to us with trying situations. Perhaps they have been in trouble with the law, or they have found themselves faced with situations of infidelity or even abuse in a relationship. Do we bless them with our reaction...or do we judge them?

It would have been easy for Elizabeth, even in the midst of her miracle to doubt the truth of Mary's account of the events of her current situation. It is often easier for us to doubt others than to enter into the difficulties they have brought and find a word of encouragement. Joy through God's eyes invites us to recognize that God will use even our difficulties, even the difficulties of others to turn the hearts of our enemies if we will turn to Him with our whole heart and soul and strength and mind! Joy through the eyes of God invites us to overcome the judgment of the world and move toward the welcoming arms of God!

Another thing Mary learns is to be observant. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." (Nehemiah 8: 10) After she has been blessed by Elizabeth, she responds with praise to God! My soul magnifies God! My spirit rejoices in God, My Savior! She enters in to the gift God has given her and recognizes this gift as her salvation! She observes the fullness of the gift!

She then praises God for recognizing her lowliness! She knows she is unworthy of such an incredible gift but she seeks to use this gift to make a difference in the world. Like the tiny village where the child is to be born, she might be thought of as insignificant in the totality of the world, but she looks to a future of promise and enters into a present of new found power! From now on, all generations will call me blessed she says! I am an unmarried, pregnant teenager, but all will call me blessed because all will recognize that the Lord has done great things for me! Surprise!

He has shown strength! It is not in Mary's strength that she speaks of the injustice of the world, but in God's strength. Mary's role is to seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly before God! God will use her, God will use us to fill the stomachs of the needy and lift up the lowly and to recognize the fullness of His promise for all generations! Mary observes these things and she speaks of them, not just to Elizabeth, but to all of us so we might be reminded of all the great joy God is sending forth even in this moment, even at this Christmas, even in the face of all the evil that seems to exist in this world! Observation invites us not to be victims of the world, but to see that God has already overcome the world! Surprise!

Finally Mary learns to be optimistic. Optimistic--Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. (Luke 15: 7)

She knows that as she speaks of the promise God makes to Israel for all generations there are many who will ignore God's promise. There are many who will refuse God's promise. Still Mary's spirit rejoices in God our savior! Even if only one hears her message, she knows there will be great rejoicing in heaven! She believes with all her heart and soul and strength and mind that God will use her, this lowly young girl from an insignificant home to overcome the adversity of the world and in spite of all the obstacles ahead of her, she remains optimistic that indeed with God nothing is impossible!

As people of Kansas, we should also know this kind of optimism. We are born into this point of view right from our beginnings! We know what it means to be thought of as insignificant. In the last national election, no candidate came into our state. We were taken for granted! We were wondered about. Just as Phillip asks about Jesus, "Has anything good ever come from Nazareth?" (John 1) So, many ask has anything good ever come from Kansas? I tell you this morning we don't have to look any farther than yesterday to answer. Scoreboard: Kansas 74—Ohio State 66. Scoreboard: Kansas State 67—Florida 61. Scoreboard: Wichita State 59—Mississippi State 51. We know because we live here the great things we are capable of. Not just in basketball. That is just plain fun! But in caring, sharing, loving others!

The great seal of the state of Kansas has on it this motto: "As astra per aspera!" "to the stars through difficulty." In 1861 when Kansas was admitted to the union, there was great division in our nation. Ours was the only state to be admitted to the union during the civil war. The difficulties in adding the 34th star to our flag were seemingly insurmountable, but Kansans recognized they were no more insurmountable than taming a difficult land or overcoming shortages in raw materials to build our towns, our homes, our churches and our lives. We have always known difficulty! We still strive to make a difference.

In this season of Advent, God invites us as people of difficulty to look beyond the six o'clock news to the possibilities God is sharing with us this year! God invites us to recognize that we are not unlike Mary. We are humble and lowly. We are modest and yet determined. We have been given great gifts to share with the world and it is up to us to share them. Joy through God's eyes comes in watching as we open these gifts. It comes in seeing the look of surprise on our faces and in watching the tears of joy as they stream down from our eyes! God has given us Joy this year at Christmas! He invites us to share it with the world in a very special way.

In this moment, I invite you to harken back to the words immediately preceding our text for today. Mary is called to get up, to go out and to be a part of all that is happening to her. The Greek word actually means to rise up or to be resurrected! God resurrects Mary into a new life, a life filled with promise and possibility. God invites us into that new life also! Be resurrected this Christmas. Begin a new life with the precious Gift God wants to share with you and with all of this broken and barren world! Surprise!

Has anything special ever come from Nazareth? From Bethlehem which is the least among God's people? Only the greatest gift ever given! Only Jesus! Let Him come from you to your family and friends this year! That will be Joy through the eyes of God!

Amen!