

Pastor's Message – 12/17/2023  
Isaiah 35:1-10    Philippians 4:4-7    Luke 1:39-45

So far, during the first two Sundays of Advent, we have focused on how the light of God's Amazing Grace! shines hope over the darkness of despair and shines peace into our lives and the life of a broken world. Now on this third Sunday of Advent, we focus on how the light of God's amazing grace shines joy in the story of Elizabeth.

We have already met Elizabeth in the story of her husband, Zechariah. But Elizabeth's story deserves its own time for reflection. In a similar, but deeper and more profound way, the light of joy shines over Elizabeth's own personal darkness.

Elizabeth's story is quite brief; we don't hear much about her in the Bible. But because of that, she may seem less important in the grander scheme of worldly events. In her time, the rich and powerful Herod rules over Judea, even as the powerful do over many lands today. And Herod and other peoples might consider themselves blest. They would have descendants who would also seem to have blest lives of their own. Some of these descendants may even inherit their own positions of power in life. By all appearances, they seem to be the people who are graced.

But Elizabeth lives isolated and concealed. She lives in the dark shadows of all that is happening in her world. Even though she is descended from priests in the line of Aaron, even though her own personal character and life testify to her faithfulness, she experiences what she and all in her time would consider a horrible curse. She bears the stigma of being a woman barren and childless. In that context, blessing seems far from her.

Perhaps it is hard for you to imagine, if you have had no trouble conceiving and have children and grandchildren, you might not understand how troublesome this was for her. In fact, you may underestimate how troublesome and painful it is for anyone to bear such a stigma and feel unblest in life. Elizabeth spells out in her own words what it means for her to be childless and barren: *The disgrace I have endured among my people (Luke 1:25).*

Indeed, it is only in the story of Elizabeth that we hear this particular word for "disgrace" uttered in the entire New Testament. It means much more than just lacking respect. It means reproach, insult, shame, and scandal. What sin has she committed to have no children?!

There are stories of other women in Scripture who have had similar experiences. While we often hear the stories of the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we rarely get to hear the stories of their wives: Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel. All three of these women experienced their own moments of "disgrace" from being barren and without child. Nor should we forget the story of Hannah, who was very much like Elizabeth in that she was married to a priest, but was also a woman who was childless and barren. Countless many more names of faithful women have their own stories that speak of their own childlessness or barrenness and the deep pain of it all. And such stories are not only from the past, but from the present. These are stories we should hear.

Elizabeth bore all these feelings of being shunned and shamed, perhaps even becoming angry and resentful. She was reduced to a state of worthlessness. She could not see a future of joy or blessing. Instead, in the lowly trenches of life, she only saw doors being shut, leaving her in isolation. You can perhaps imagine her sadness and despair.

What is more shameful for us is that this same kind of mocking and taunting still takes place today. People who are already disgraced bear up under insults from those who are privileged. People are stigmatized and disgraced on the basis of their gender, race, politics, economic and social status, and even religion. It's not hard to hear those experiences in today's anti-Semitism and prejudice and

violence against Palestinians. Meanwhile, those of privileged status may not even be consciously aware of the hurt they do to those among them who feel this deep pain of shame and disgrace. We make it worse by our sins of omission, ignoring the pain of others.

Jesus confronted this problem, especially among the religious elite who apparently had no problem shutting out those who they regarded as sinful and scandalous. Instead of opening the community to such as these, these so-called religious ones regarded the “disgraced” as unacceptable—people to be shunned and shamed and judged unworthy. It is not that these religious elite were without sin. But they did not see their sin. They only saw the sins of others.

But Jesus himself did not close doors, or leave people rejected. He became a friend to sinners and tax collectors. He graced people who could never find grace on their own—eating with tax collectors and talking with women and letting them touch him. But most importantly, for them, and for us all, Jesus would accept the fullness of our disgrace himself in order to give us the fullness of God’s amazing grace. In his crucifixion, he bore the insults, the reproach, the scandal, and became publicly “disgraced” upon the cross, even bearing the judgment of the sinful curse and total abandonment by God. All this he endured for the sake of all who are disgraced sinners—indeed, for our sake, for the sake of all who are sinners.

This is a word of gracious joy for all who are disgraced and barren in life. And such grace and blessing include Elizabeth. A miracle now happens. The light of joy will dawn upon her. As the angel Gabriel made the joyous announcement to Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, would be with child, so too for Elizabeth. A little bundle of joy would soon be growing within her!

Why, then, did she wait five months before leaving her secluded, isolated life behind closed doors? Why, indeed! Perhaps it was because she knew that if she went out and tried telling others, no one would believe her. She would only subject herself to more scorn and derision. The people would laugh at her.

But given the fulfillment of the promise of joy, Elizabeth may well have had a more promising and joyous reason in waiting to share the good news. She would wait for the time when all the people might rejoice with her. Then they would no longer laugh at her, but laugh with her. For she does, indeed, get the last laugh—the promising laugh over darkness and disgrace. Now there are no more tears or sadness or despair! Now there is blessing! Now there is joy! Now there is the light of grace to shine upon her and upon all!

If anything, it was for the sake of joy—her joy and the joy of all—that she waited until joy was literally showing! She kept the joy to herself for a time, all along knowing full well what she trusted, that her disgrace has already been lifted. But when the time was right, and even for the very same people who once disgraced her, or treated her with reproach, insults, and mocking, she came out showing them the grace of joy! For all those darkened in their false sense of being better than others, for all who may have gossiped about the sins of others but not their own, now, Elizabeth, like her Lord, gives them something new to talk about!

Surely one of those new things is that disgrace is no more! Disgrace is gone! It has been taken away—taken away by the grace of the Lord’s favor!

*This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people (Luke 1:25).*

Such promising expectation is not meant for her alone, but for all who have experienced the pain of disgrace, reproach, insult or even scandal. All those who dealt with this pain, which may have driven into isolation, concealing themselves from the light of day, shutting themselves off from the

very world that seems to shun them—all of these may now themselves show their own promise of joy!

They do so because they no longer need to live in fear and hiding. While there may yet be those of darkened imagination who still put on airs that they are somehow better and blessed in life, those who have faith in Christ bear the promise of grace and blessing within them. Those of faith may proclaim there is something new to talk about, a promise to show to the world, that the Lord's favor rests upon us, and that through faith, we are children of God, regardless of how the world sees us.

If the misery of the disgraced likes company, the greatest news is that they are never alone. Elizabeth knew of this favorable status of the Lord. So do we. But Christ "took away the disgrace," taking it upon himself, so that we may, instead, have the light of grace now shining upon us, as a people unashamed and full of promise (Luke 1:25). Elizabeth, celebrates that with laughter and joy:

*This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people (Luke 1:25).*

But there is more to the story of Elizabeth's promise of grace and joy. She would receive a visitor in the sixth month of her pregnancy. And not just any visitor, but a young virgin named Mary. Mary herself had just had a visit from the angel Gabriel before she came in haste to the hill country to visit her relative, Elizabeth. She came with her own joyous and promising news. And upon entering the home, upon her greeting, Elizabeth tells us, "the baby in my womb leaped for joy."

Here is an incredible moment! These two women, pregnant not only with child, but pregnant with promise, find abundant joy beyond all measure! The dawning of newness overcomes all the old barren obstacles of life.

One might presume that Elizabeth—being the elder and one with priestly background—might be in this instance the person of more nobler status being visited by a lowly young virgin. But that's not the way that Elizabeth sees it at all. On the contrary, Elizabeth, in humility, regards herself as one of lower status, now standing in the very presence of the mother of her Lord. The child that Mary bears is her Lord. And assuredly, the Lord has the higher status.

But isn't it all part of the great joy that this Lord bestows grace not by being superior but by humbling himself, bringing the blessing of grace in this visit to dear Elizabeth? Elizabeth, who once knew the depths of disgrace and reproach before all, now comes to see that her Lord also comes to her as a humble visitor, just as he is a humble visitor for the sake of the whole world. Jesus did not put himself over others or talk down to others. On the contrary, he placed his right to worship and praise aside, to lift us up, so that we, despite our disgrace, might be people blessed with his everlasting grace.

That is why Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, now exclaims with a loud cry to cousin Mary, *blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? (Luke 1:42-43).*

Yet isn't that also part of the joyous surprise for us all—that this Lord Jesus who we praise and worship is also the very One who comes to bless us himself with his own freeing grace? The Son of God comes humbly down from heaven for us through the womb of a lowly virgin, as a little child, in order to raise us up—one and all—as children of promise in the very eyes of God. Elizabeth gets it and lets us all in on this surprising joy.

*For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord (Luke 1:44-45).*

Elizabeth believed this promise, as did Mary. And the light of joy comes also from the child leaping in Elizabeth's womb. Her child shares in the joy that the true Source of God's amazing grace is here in Mary's womb.

Here, at the ending of the story of Elizabeth, we find the focus on fulfillment and salvation. Mary would then break out into singing the song we now know as the Magnificat, a song filled with promising and powerful words of how the Lord's light of joy shines upon all people. Its placement in Scripture hints that at least some of this song was joyously shared with Elizabeth.

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant (Luke 1:46-48).*

One can hear both Mary and Elizabeth singing together this song of joy—and even inviting us to sing along with them in all our own lowliness and humility of spirit. For from the depths of nothingness, God births something new—a promise, a Child, Jesus Christ, who will overcome all our darkness and let his light of joy shine upon us all.

Mary would stay with Elizabeth for another three months, up to the time of John's birth. And it is about that time when all of Elizabeth's neighbors and relatives will come out to the house of Elizabeth. Their coming out to her already indicates that they no longer come out with reproach or scorn or disgrace toward her. They come to her because they know that the Lord has shown her great mercy.

And Elizabeth is one of the first to confess her joy and God's promise present in her baby boy. For when family and friends were gathered for the naming of her child, and wanted the couple to name their son Zechariah after his father, Elizabeth was the first to correct them.

*No, he is to be called John (Luke 1:60).*

For the name John means, "God is gracious." Surely Elizabeth had more than enough reason to know the graciousness of the Lord in this birth, even without her husband Zechariah, in all his silence, trying his best to explain his own promising encounter.

Elizabeth's own name means, "My God is an oath" or "My God is abundance." Indeed, as the light of gracious joy shines over her and upon all who came to rejoice with her, there is an abundance of joy and blessing. There is a promising oath of joy and blessing. For joy sings over all the din of misery and disgrace and over all the pain of gloom and doom. This is the joy that Christ brings, for which Elizabeth's own son, John, would be a forerunner.

But even these friends and neighbors and relatives are not the only ones rejoicing. One can hear the joy of Sarah and Rebekah and Rachel and Hannah, along with all the many disgraced ones of this world. All these people are dancing and singing and laughing with Elizabeth. For the Lord has visited them all with promise.

The light of joy shines upon them all. And even the angels of heaven rejoice with them. That light of joy comes to us from the Lord Jesus Christ who has visited us with his promise of God's amazing grace. We, too, get to dance, sing and laugh as children of the promise—all for the sheer joy that now fills our spirits and leads us to sing along with Elizabeth and Mary!

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! (Luke 1:46-47).*