

Sermon
14 December 2014
West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald

Text: Luke 1:39-56

God sent an angel to Mary to tell her that she was going to give birth to the Saviour of the world. Mary, who was a virgin, wanted to know how that was at all possible?

The angel replied that even Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, who was too old to have a child and thought that she was never going to have a family of her own, was expecting a baby. "For nothing is impossible with God".

"Nothing is impossible with God", the angel said. So Mary grabbed her things and went to Elizabeth straight away, and when they saw each other, we read, "the baby leaped in Elizabeth's womb".

The Greek word used here for "leap" means to "leap with joy".

So just being in the company of the unborn Jesus, made the unborn John the Baptist "leap with joy".

I want to read you a wee sketch, written by Nick Fawcett, from the perspective of Elizabeth (Light dawns, 2011, p42-43).

Even if you are a sceptic, and you think that that is ridiculous, unborn babies can't leap with joy; this story at least tells us about the joy Elizabeth felt in her heart. There is no denying that she felt overjoyed about the news that Mary was expecting Jesus, because otherwise she would not have interpreted her baby moving inside her as "leaping with joy".

Six months before this happened, something amazing happened to Elizabeth. She was married to the priest Zechariah, and although the both of them lived in close relation to God, they didn't have a family.

Remember that society worked differently in those days. A woman was only worth as much as the child she was carrying, which meant that Elizabeth felt quite worthless.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to Zachariah to tell him that he will have a son in his old age after all, and that he is to call him John. Despite the fact that Zachariah was a priest and should have known better than to doubt God, he just couldn't believe his ears, which resulted in him not being able to speak until the day his son was born.

When André and I discussed this text yesterday, he said that it must have been really hard for Zachariah to not be able to talk to Elizabeth throughout her whole pregnancy... But then, on second thought, he was probably better off that way, because (talking from experience, when I expected our boys, André said) nothing you say to a pregnant woman is ever the right thing anyway!!

So, because the priest, who was supposed to tell the people that God can do anything, didn't believe it *himself*, he didn't get to talk at all for nine months, until he could see with his own eyes that God indeed can do anything.

Mary's reaction when the angel came to her was almost the complete opposite of Zachariah's – she told the angel “I am the Lord's servant...May it be as you have said.” Then she went to her cousin Elizabeth and sang the beautiful song of praise to God that we read from the Bible this morning. Mary was filled with joy, a joy that spontaneously bubbled out of her, she couldn't keep it contained.

So Mary was filled with joy – because she was carrying the Saviour of the World. Elizabeth was filled with joy when she realized that Mary was carrying the Saviour of the world. Even the unborn John the Baptist leaped with joy to be in the company of the unborn Jesus.

We are nearing the time when we are going to celebrate that all this happened. So what should our reaction be? We should be filled with joy too.

The mere fact that Jesus wants to be a part of our lives, should fill us with the same kind of joy Mary and Elizabeth felt.

But unfortunately joy is the one thing we don't see much of in the world today. And I think that has something to do with the fact that people experience emotions on the grounds of things that happen to them. What I'm trying to say is, that we feel joy when good things happen to us, but we feel upset or unsatisfied or grumpy or sad when things don't

work out the way we've hoped for. So, we are dependent on external circumstances to determine our feelings and reactions.

But that's not the way it should be. Joy is something we should have inside us, despite what is going on around us.

Joy is not a commodity that can be produced or bought, like so many other things that make us happy today:

- We can't get joy on offer at ASDA;
- We can't buy joy anywhere, not even in an exclusive store like Jenner's;
- We can't download joy on the internet;
- We can't win joy in a lawsuit;
- We can't turn joy on with a remote control;
- We can't earn joy;
- We can't inherit joy.

Joy is like nothing else we are used to acquiring in life. We can't even give somebody joy for Christmas. Joy comes from *within* us, joy comes from God.

Joy is something God gave to every believer in the birth of Jesus Christ. When God put Jesus in that manger, he put joy in all our hearts too. It's *there*; we just need to find it, to feel it.

But if we focus too much on the things that we think can take the joy away from us, we won't feel it. If we only focus on our worries and our problems, we might not even be able to find the joy in our hearts at all.

But I can assure you, it *is* there. Anybody who truly understands what it means that Christ came to earth to save us, should leap with joy in the presence of the Lord. Here in church, and everywhere, because through his Spirit God is with us every minute of every day.

Nothing that happens to you can ever be bigger than God, and that in itself is a reason to leap with joy! If you feel that joy in your heart, you might even be able to leap *over* your problems and worries!!

Joy is not the same thing as just feeling happy. Because even when you are in distress, you will be able to feel the deep rooted joy of the knowledge that God is with you inside your heart.

Because just like the angel told Zachariah, and then later told Mary:
Nothing is impossible for God.

So, whatever is going on in your life this morning, remember – nothing is impossible for God. Feel the joy inside yourself this Christmas, and see how much smaller your problems will become.

The gift God gave us all in Jesus Christ is so incredibly amazing, it shouldn't just put a smile on our faces; it should make us leap with joy!

May you leap into Christmas, into 2015 and into the rest of your life with a deep rooted joy that comes from God himself.

Amen