

Dissident Fellowship

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Luke 1:39-55

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

December 19, 2021

The past two weeks on our Advent Journey we have been walking with the wild and rather intense John The Baptist- we encountered him in the wilderness- eating bugs and calling his audience a brood of Vipers.... and calling us to repentance to prepare for the coming messiah. And today... On this fourth Sunday of Advent... we go backwards a bit... and learn about John's origin story... and we get to meet the parents of this wild man 🤪

John is the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth- Luke tells us that Zechariah is a Priest and that Elizabeth is a descendant of Aaron. Now, this is an easy detail for us modern reader to overlook- but it is important to note that both Zechariah and Elizabeth were children of the priests of Israel- Aaron (Moses' Brother) was the first High Priest of Israel. So From Aaron onward... all priests of Israel came from his tribe- and it was the role of the priests to take care of the temple, offer sacrifices, and make sure incense was always burning in the holy of holies (the inner most room of the temple where God's spirit dwelt.)

The Author of Luke also tells us that both, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. Now, I'm going to come back to this detail later... but I want you all to remember that Luke tells us very little about these two but thinks it is important that we know that these two take the Law of God very seriously.... And that they followed all of not just the commandments, but also Regulations....

The story continues and Zechariah's priestly group is on duty at the temple, and Zechariah is chosen by a game of chance to burn incense on the altar within the Holy Place. This is a sacred duty that any priest in Israel would have been ecstatic to get the chance to do The subtext of this story is that Zechariah should have been expecting to have an encounter with God.... He is literally going

into a room where God's spirit lives.... AND.... While in the holiest room of the temple Zechariah encounters an Angel named Gabriel- Angel literally meaning a messenger from God... But Zechariah is not exactly welcoming to this messenger. The Angel tells Zechariah, that he and his wife Elizabeth will conceive a child.... But Zechariah responds saying that is impossible... we are too old for that.... Though a priest, it seems Zechariah has forgotten the story of Abraham and Sarah who God blessed with child late in life, or the Story of Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel, who conceived only after God's intervention. Rather, when confronted by an angel with this Good news... Zechariah's immediate response is doubt... he responds to the Gabriel and says "how is this possible" and Gabriel has a quick and rather intense response to this doubt... Zechariah is silenced... made mute... "until the day these things occur." I have to admit when reading the story of Zechariah in the temple, it does feel as though Gabriel's judgement is swift leaving little room for Grace and understanding. But I also wonder if Zechariah's surroundings are important... here we have a priest of Israel, chosen to be in the holiest place... who response to an action from God is doubt and disbelief. If there as a place to encounter a miracle... Zechariah is in it... and yet.. he couldn't lean in... he couldn't believe.... I wonder if He was silenced as to both learn about himself... but also not to cast doubt on what is to come... Speaking with Scott this week about this story Scott joked.... It typically does take an action of the Holy Spirit to shut us Preachers up!" I wonder what gift Elizabeth was more happy with- conceiving a child...or getting a break from her husband's preaching

But I also feel for Zechariah... it can be hard to lean in and believe in God's miraculous intervention... Several years ago... Crawford (my husband) was working as a hospital Chaplain (don't worry I have his full permission to share this story).... On this particular night.... He was working as the on call chaplain.... When in the middle of the night he was called to the Pediatric ICU. Which a call in the middle of the night... is never a good sign.... And it is really not a good sign when you are called to any pediatric unit in the middle of the night. When Crawford arrived he checked in the with nurses and doctors and they told him all signs were pointing to this child not making it through the night, but that the family did not seem to be understanding... the doctors were hoping Crawford could help the family make peace with the impending death of their child.... and so Crawford walked towards the room- he began to hear a sound... and he realized it was the family praying. This was not the prayer of quiet Presbyterians... rather this was a roar of charismatic prayer.... This family was praying loudly, and boldly.... They

were asking... and maybe more accurately demanding a miracle from God... When Crawford entered the room- they said... oh Chaplain... come on in here... pray! Pray! With us! Crawford said... not knowing really what to do he joined their prayer- but the whole time he was thinking this poor family... what are they going to do when this child dies- Crawford leaned into doubt in this moment.... And was totally with the Doctors on this one... and in his own prayers.. prayed for the family to understand that a miracle was not going to happen. Eventually when he left the family that evening, he fully expected that he would be called back later to meet with the family following the death of the child.

A couple days later, however, Crawford arrived to work and as he was walking in the front door... he was passed by this family who was in the process of taking their child home. And Crawford says he was both stunned... and convicted. He says I learned that day that miracles are indeed possible. and who am I to doubt God's intervention in our life. Crawford learned that day what Zechariah learned long ago- that God is able to do the unconceivable... and that we do not have to always assume the worst... that we can hope for God's intervention in miraculous ways in our life.

Have you ever had the experience where you are feeling really happy... fulfilled... excited... in love... Joyful... and then immediately your mind begins to get worried.... Uh oh... you might not want to get too happy- there is suddenly sense of foreboding; the thought of "uh oh, this feels too good, something bad is going to happen," and you are filled with the conviction that at any moment, the other shoe is going to drop.

A woman who I greatly admire, and many of you have possibly heard of her... Brené Brown calls this human experience *foreboding joy*. Brené argues that joy is one of the most difficult feelings for us to allow ourselves to feel, because it automatically makes us incredibly vulnerable. When we allow our hearts to fill with joy, we become vulnerable to the possibility of it being taken away, our hearts being crushed, or our hopes dashed. So when we feel Joy... we try to protect ourselves from getting hurt. But self-protection comes at a great cost... to protect yourself you must bargain away your joy. ¹

¹(<https://www.relationalrecovery.com/foreboding-joy/>)

I often wonder if Foreboding Joy is often used to put out the fire of God's creativity.. or to cast doubt on God's miraculous intervention in our lives. I think when Gabriel announced his good news to Zechariah that the news was just too good for him to believe it... and so rather than allow himself to hope, and rejoice... Zechariah shuts down the joy... and choses to protect his heart by leaning into doubt and fear..

But then in the midst of Zechariah's silence.... Elizabeth and Zechariah receive a visitor. Mary, a cousin of Elizabeth arrives... who has also just received a visit from the Angel Gabriel... a message about a miraculous conception... But Mary's encounter went differently. Mary... did not lean into doubt and fear... she did not second guess her joy... rather she courageously said **Yes** to the call of God.... Yes, to being the Mother of the coming messiah.

After Mary's conversation with Gabriel she rushed to see Elizabeth ... the text is not clear why she makes this choices... but I like to imagine that Elizabeth was a mother figure in Mary's life... and when Mary arrives she is greeted by Elizabeth- and we get to witness one of the most joyful encounters in the whole Bible. Up until this point we have not heard from Elizabeth and do not know her thoughts on all that has occurred. But when Elizabeth goes to greet Mary she is immediately filled with the Holy Spirit- and Elizabeth exclaims "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. **43** And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me."

Now, I want to come back to a point I made earlier... Luke tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous before God, following all of the commandments and regulations." I want to suggest that Elizabeth's response to Mary is not the expected response. Nowhere in the Jewish Law is there an excuse for Mary to be a pregnant unwed mother.... And certainly there was not any room for Mary to have been seen as blessed.

Elizabeth's joyful response to Mary is the Holy Spirit within her recognizing the Holy Spirit within Mary... and it is also a dissent- a change in the way things are done. Dissident is defined as a person who opposes official policy, especially that of an authoritarian state. Two unknown and relatively powerless women choose to be dissident... to not follow the rules and regulations of the patriarchal system they are a part of.... Come what be they chose to be different... which

means making the way for the Kingdom of God to be born on earth- and I wonder if this would have gone differently had Zechariah not been silenced. We know that Zechariah's first response to God's new thing is fear and doubt... and I do not think it is unreasonable to see a scene in which unwed and pregnant Mary shows up and Zechariah's response is to turn her into temple authorities... Later in the gospels we encounter a woman caught the act of the adultery and a crowd preparing to stone that woman to death. I'm not sure without God's intervention... Mary would not have confronted a similar outcome.

Our advent theme this year... "hope in the face of the empire" can be seen in this dissident friendship- It is hope that these two chose to follow to co-conspire with God, to dissent from the ways of "the world" and to follow the Joy of God made real on earth rather, rather than letting that Joy be stamped out by fear, trepidation... or regulations... In Elizabeth's declaration she even says "blessed are you who believed! That there would be fulfillment of what the Lord spoke"- I don't know about you but this seems like a direct comment or contrast with Zechariah's disbelief.

In response to Elizabeth's welcome and acceptance... Mary just explodes with Joy... she burst out in song.... in a portion of scripture we call today the Magnificat... In Mary's song she really drives home the point of God's paradoxical activity in the world. Which can both be seen as a foretelling of the work Jesus has come to do.... But it can also be seen as a commentary on her own situation. In our story today... Mary, a no name girl from a ridiculed town- Nazareth- is boldly proclaiming prophesy and being declared as Blessed- where as Zechariah, a highly respected priest, has been set low and made mute- this in itself is the exact sort of reversal Mary is talking about when she says:

God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

Mary is proclaiming the work that Jesus has come to do... - that God has come and has inhabited flesh with the purpose of turning our world upside down... In our modern understandings of Mary We often portray her as timid, untarnished, obedient- and she probably was to some extent- But God knew that a woman of both faithfulness *and tenaciousness* would be necessary to mother the Christ.

Mary boldly states in the Gospel of Luke, “God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” This is not a Magnificat of human power and glory but rather a dissident choice to recognize God’s new activity in the world.... This is the action of someone who has Hope in the face of the Empire- and the simple friendship between Elizabeth and Mary- the comradery, and Joy of two friends... changes the course of history!

And I believe Lewinsville Presbyterian Church that we are called to be like Elizabeth this Advent season- to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit so that we can see the new things God is doing in our midst. May we not be like Zechariah- to follow our first instinct to doubt and be fearful... to think of all the things that might go wrong... but rather... we are called to let Joy guide our path... and practice the spiritual discipline of Hope in the face of any empire we face.

This past Wednesday I witnessed our congregation do just this.. to make the choice of responding to God’s call. This past Wednesday was our final Afghan Refugee Discernment meeting- for three weeks a large group from this congregation were meeting to discern; How is our congregation called to accompany our Afghan Refugee Neighbors. At these meetings we learned about the crisis, we met with potential partners, and on Wednesday we made a decision on how to move forward. A proposal was brought to the group and it was approved by a unanimous vote. In the following weeks and months the congregation will be hearing more about how to get involved with this new mission of our congregation. But I am so incredibly grateful that this congregation’s response to this call is to roll up their sleeves and get to work.

As we go forth this week into the final week of Advent... as we continue to prepare our hearts for the coming of Jesus- let us learn from Elizabeth in three ways:

1. First may we be open to God’s miraculous intervention in our lives. Just because something seems impossible or insurmountable does not mean it is impossible with God.
2. Secondly... let us be people who can experience Joy- and not immediately 2nd guess it. When you are feeling Joy- which is a gift from God- don’t be the person (myself included) who begins to think through

all the worst-case scenarios. When you experience Joy- savor it, embody it... and recognize it for the holy gift that it is. and share it with all your encounter. I recently went to hear one of my Beloved Seminary Professors – Yolonda Peirce- give a lecture at Potomac Presbyterian Church. In the Q&A time she was asked how does our church begin working towards social justice... and her answer surprised me- she said all tough calls must start with Joy- she said Joy is both a gift from God, and also what sustains us through the challenges. That is true of Mary and Elizabeth... and will be true for us today. Let us begin all new things with Joy- as to be sustained through the journey.

3. And finally, let us be a people who are open to the new things God is doing in our midst- and even if we have to dissent against the empires or establishments of our world... let us be people who are willing and ready to follow God who is doing a new thing in our midst.

Amen

Let us Prayer:

The coming of our Lord is near,
And we wait in joyful expectation,
Draw close, Lord Jesus Christ,
Shed your light on all that is filled with darkness.
The coming of our Lord is near,
And we wait with hope filled hearts,
Draw close, God's beloved son,
Teach us the wonder of your all embracing love.
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**