

A Dance of Joy

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[0 : 00] We're going to read in Luke's Gospel and we're having a little series of three running up to Christmas with the title Joy to the World, the Lord is Come. And we're looking at a very short section in Luke chapter 1, it's page 856 I think in the Bibles and it's headed up Mary visits Elizabeth.

Now, you know it very well, it's easy to miss it actually, but we're going to spend three weeks on these verses just to get very clear what it's all about.

So Luke chapter 1 then at verse 39. Of course it follows straight on from the birth of Jesus being foretold by the angel and in those days Mary arose and went with haste to the hill country, to a town in Judah and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

And why is it granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.

[1 : 37] I'll keep that open in front of you. And our subject today is a dance of joy. I wonder what your favorite Christmas songs are.

I looked up on the internet this week, I googled top Christmas songs, and I discovered that in a survey taken last year, the favorite song in one poll was by a band called The Pogues, and it's called Fairytale in New York.

I'm not sure what that says about Christmas and whether we've lost sight of what it's really all about, but it certainly says something. So I wasn't very satisfied with that, so I went on to Classic FM and hoped for better things.

And indeed, I find better things. And last year, the top of the Classic FM poll for Christmas carols was, oh, can anyone guess? Silent Night?

No, not Silent Night. That was second. Well, now, In the Bleak Midwinter was fourth and seventh. And I think that actually adds up to being first, because it was two different versions of it.

[2 : 38] There was the Harold Dark version and the Holst version. So that probably does top it in a way, but that was actually only fourth. Hark the Herald Angels Sing was third. Top of all was O Holy Night.

You know that one? O Holy Night, the stars are deeply shining. It is the night of our dear Saviour. You know that one. Well, not quite Pavarotti, but anyway.

You get the drift. But, you know, Christmas and music really go together, don't they? I was preparing this while I was listening to Bas' Christmas Oratorio. It's always what I do on the 1st of December.

Bas' Christmas Oratorio goes on. And I listened to it all through December, along with the Messiah. That's probably my two favourite bits of Christmas music. But, of course, from the very beginning, Christmas was associated with songs and with singing.

Not a modern thing at all. People still want to have the Christmas number one slot. It's still a big thing, isn't it, for songs. But it's always been like that, right from the very, very start.

[3 : 41] Christmas has always been full of song. And, in fact, Luke's Gospel, we looked at this a few years ago in our Sunday services, Luke's Gospel punctuates his account of the birth of Jesus with song after song after song.

There's Mary's song, isn't there? The Magnificat. And then there's Zechariah's song. The Benedictus. There's the angel's song. The Gloria. There's Simeon's song. The Nunc Dimitris.

There's song after song after song. And the Christmas story for Luke is absolutely alive with music. With praise and with worship to our wonderful God. George Campbell Morgan, the great preacher, once of Westminster Chapel in London, said this, When Jesus came into the world, poetry expressed itself, and music was reborn.

I think that's a terrific thing to say, isn't it? And, of course, it was so. How could it be any other way when the one who is the focus of all the praise of heaven and earth came into our world himself and showed himself to us?

Of course, the world would burst forth with songs of joy. What else could it do? And, of course, music is such a necessity, isn't it? Because it helps us in our response of praise to God.

[4 : 54] It almost allows us another dimension of praise to express what's in our heart to the Lord Jesus. Listen to what the great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, said about this.

Next to the word of God, he says, The noble art of music is the greatest treasure in the world. It controls our thoughts, our minds, our hearts, our spirits. This precious gift has been given to man alone that he might thereby remind himself that God has created man for the express purpose of praise and extolling God.

And then he says this, A person who does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being.

He should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs. So there you are. That's pretty clear, isn't it? From Martin Luther, none else. So, Ruth, well done on the piano.

You'll be very much in the approval of Martin Luther in heaven. And you see, that's true, isn't it? And that's why wherever God's spirit has been greatly at work in the world in reviving power, there has always been an upsurge in singing and in song and in songwriting.

[6 : 08] That was true of the Reformation. In fact, Martin Luther, did you know this? Martin Luther insisted that anybody who was a candidate for ministry training, for ordination, had to undergo theological testing and also musical testing.

I don't know how many of us would make it in there if we had to do that. What do you think, Paul? I'm not sure. But you see, it marked the Great Awakening in the 18th century as well, didn't it? Think of Charles Wesley and all his marvellous hymns.

Wherever there's a great work of God's spirit, music seems to erupt. Now, notice though, it's that way around, not the other way around. Today a lot of people are confused. They think that if you have endless music and endless singing, somehow that will create a great work of God's spirit. No, it's the other way around. It's when God's word is at work, reviving his people in their hearts, when they understand the great message of salvation, then they burst into song, because they're full of joy.

And that's exactly what we have here in these few verses, in Luke 1, 39 to 45. Actually, this is the very first song of Christmas, from Elizabeth. No one ever credits poor Elizabeth with a song.

[7 : 16] Nobody gives her a song, a fancy title, like her husband got, the Benedictus. But actually, if you look at the verses here, you'll see Elizabeth sang a Benedictus. Benedictus, just a Latin word that means blessed.

And that's what she sings in verse 42. Blessed are you among women. Blessed is the fruit of your womb. So it's time that we redress this unfair discrimination.

And Elizabeth got a bit of credit for singing the Benedictus as well. Poor old Zechariah, by the way, at this point, if you read the story in chapter 1, he's not singing at all. He's not even talking, is he? He's being struck dumb by the angel, remember? He didn't believe what the angel was going to say, so the angel said, you're going to be dumb. So he can't sing. Might be able to do some sign language or some actions, but his wife is able to sing.

Blessed be the fruit of your womb, Mary. And blessed be my Lord who has come to me. That's what she's saying. The fruit of your womb. And blessed, verse 45, be she who believed.

[8 : 16] So credit where credit's due. Let's focus on Elizabeth's first song about Christmas. But in fact, if we look carefully, we'll find it's more than just a song. It's actually a song and dance routine.

Now don't worry, maybe you're thinking, this chap's been away for too long. What's happened to this Presbyterian ministry? He's gone a bit potty. I haven't gone potty, talking about singing and dancing. I've just been studying the text.

I want you to see it too. That's exactly what we see. The very first song of Christmas is actually set off by a dance of joy in Elizabeth's womb.

Joy experienced by the unborn prophet, John the Baptist, in the womb. A dance of joy in the womb. That's what I want to look at today. Look at the text.

Look at verse 39. Mary arrives at the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth, her cousins, and she's carrying, isn't she, in her womb, the incarnate Lord of glory, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

[9:17] A tiny embryo in her womb. And she greets them, and as soon as the words are out of her mouth, we get an extraordinary, miraculous expression of joy.

Verse 41. The baby leaped in her womb, says Luke. In verse 44, Elizabeth's own words, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. The very first joy that Luke points us to in the arrival of Jesus is experienced by John.

It's intrauterine joy. And it's the joy experienced by a spirit-filled, unborn child. That's what verse 41 means, isn't it?

The baby leaped for joy. He was filled with the spirit just as his mother was. Just as we're told she was filled with the Holy Spirit. Well, so was John in her womb. And that simply fulfills, doesn't it, exactly what the angel had said to Zechariah.

If you don't believe me, look back to verse 15. What did the angel say? He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And here it is.

[10:27] The very first hearer of the gospel of the coming of Jesus Christ. The very first believer in Luke's gospel. And he's in the womb. And he leaps for joy.

He dances at the presence of the Savior. He dances at the presence of the Savior, who also is still in the womb. Isn't that extraordinary? I don't know if you find that hard to believe, but that is what the text here is telling us very plainly.

And don't forget who the writer is, by the way. It's Dr. Luke, isn't it? He's a physician. We know that from the second book of his, from Acts. He's not entirely out of his field here, talking about intrauterine matters.

He knows what he's on about. He's not a fool. He's a man who reads the journals. He's a man who's not taken in by mumbo-jumbo. He's taken in by science and evidence-based medicine. So we're urged to trust his judgment.

We can trust this man not to be the sort of chap who has wild speculations about these sorts of things. Quite the reverse. He's a very careful man. He's a sober assessor of the evidence.

[11:36] He tells us that right at the very beginning of chapter one, doesn't he, right at the beginning of his book. Just look back to those verses. I do think it's important. Verse two says he's researched carefully all the way back to the very beginning, to eyewitnesses who have delivered this to us, he says.

He's considered every single piece of the evidence, having followed all things closely, he says, and carefully. He's taken great care, says verse four, to write an orderly account so we can be certain of the things that we've been taught.

This is a careful man. He's not given to wild speculations. He's meticulous. He's scrupulous in his audit of the facts to give us the truth. And what is the truth according to Dr. Luke, the historian, the physician, the careful recorder?

However, the fact is, John has a six-month fetus in the womb. This was the sixth month, we're told by Luke.

At the very moment that Mary arrived with a tiny embryo in her womb, baby Jesus, he leaped for joy. He rejoiced at the presence of Jesus the Messiah.

[12:53] Let me quote to you from Howard Marshall, a New Testament scholar. He was a teacher of mine when I was at college. I think it would have to be said he is one of the soberest, most careful scholars you could possibly ever read, far from being outrageous and wild in his writings.

And he says this about verse 41. A miraculous expression of the emotions of the unborn child is meant. Not that Elizabeth simply saw her joy reflected in the uncommon movement of her child. See, what he's saying is there can be absolutely no doubt. Just like his mother here, John in the womb was filled with the Holy Spirit. It's a dance of joy, spirit-filled joy, of the very first Christian believer in the womb.

The real joy experienced in the womb by this unborn prophet. And in fact, he's the first evangelist too in Luke's Gospel, isn't he? What did the angel promise about John?

Remember again in verse 15? He'll be filled with the Spirit, even from his mother's womb, and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. Well, here it is beginning.

[14:12] It's John's spirit-filled leaping in the womb that turns his mother to recognize the coming of the Lord, isn't it? That's what Elizabeth says in verse 43. She clearly recognizes that Mary is bearing in her womb her Lord.

The mother of my Lord is coming to me. That's what she's saying. How does she know that? Verse 44 is plain. For, this is how I know it, behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

That's how she knew. Listen to Howard Marshall again. She knew that Mary was to be the mother of the Messiah by the joyous movements of her child in response to Mary's greeting.

It wasn't just an intrauterine dance of joy, it was an intrauterine evangelistic dance. How about that? What are we to make of this?

It's just all so extraordinary, isn't it? But you see, that's exactly the point. That's exactly the point.

Everyone in this story, everyone is being caught up in something truly miraculous.

[15:20] Because it's God's story. And wherever God is at work, amazing things can happen.

Amazing things do happen. You see, that's what Luke is telling us all the way through his Gospel.

And especially right here at the very beginning of the opening chapters. Our God, he says, is a God who keeps his promises. Wonderful promises. Fantastic promises that seem unbelievable. He keeps his promise.

And he does it in an absolutely amazing host of ways. Just what the angel said to Mary in verse 37, isn't it? Nothing, nothing will be impossible with God.

God makes promises. And he means us to believe them. He means us to trust his word. His promises will always, always be fulfilled in their time.

That was the angel's rebuke to Zechariah, wasn't it? When he didn't believe in verse 20. You're going to have to be dumb for a while, Zechariah, because you didn't believe my words. You didn't believe God's promise.

[16:24] But God always keeps his word. And he can do it in wonderful ways, in truly extraordinary ways. Even filling an unborn baby with his Holy Spirit.

Even making him dance with joy and using his joy to reveal the Savior to his mother. Absolutely extraordinary, isn't it?

By the way, we shouldn't miss the significance, should we, of this extraordinary encounter between John and Jesus when they're both still in the womb. John, I said, was something like a 24-week-old fetus in the sixth month.

Jesus, at this stage, was no more than a few weeks at the very, very most. Just, as many people would say today, just a little ball of cells. Nothing. And yet, the presence of this tiny embryo is, even then, the presence of God incarnate.

And John, John was just a fetus that, well, today we wouldn't hesitate to destroy, to dispose of. That horrible word, termination.

[17:32] But he leaped for joy in the Holy Spirit. We need to think about that, don't we, when we talk all about tiny embryos and just using balls of cells to harvest stem cells to experiment on and all that sort of thing that our government has now just pushed through.

We need to think about that when we think about the awful matter of abortion, don't we? It's a chilling thing. We take God's word seriously. Chilling thing to think what we're doing in the name of science, isn't it?

But another thing, and this, this is a much more wonderful thing. Think about this. John was the greatest prophet of them all, according to Jesus. But he began fulfilling his destiny even before his birth.

And you see, in God's story, wonderful things can happen. And it's not unique. It's not unique in the Bible story and it's not unique in world history either.

And that should make us think about our own children, maybe our grandchildren. We should think about our prayers for them. But also, we should think about God's purpose for them from their very infancy. In fact, from before their infancy, before they're even born.

[18:43] Of course, in a sense, John's unique. But in another sense, he's not unique at all, is he? Because Elizabeth and the others in this story, well, they're deliberately set forth for us as examples of true faith.

Examples that we're to follow. That's why verse 6 of chapter 1 tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous before God. That they were walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

In other words, Luke's saying they were real believers, real Christians, people of real faith. And we're to follow in the path of the faith of those who have gone before us, like them and like John and like others.

You see, Jesus tells us that although John was a great prophet, he says at the same time, even the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he because we've been given far greater privileges even than John.

John lived to see the birth of Jesus. He lived to see the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. But he was executed, wasn't he, before Jesus' great triumph on the cross and before his resurrection.

[19 : 47] He didn't get to see what we have witnessed through history. The resurrection of Jesus Christ, the accomplishment, the final work of God on earth being completed. So you see, in a way we are just like these ordinary believers in the Christian story.

And that means that God knows also for us in the same way as he knew for Zechariah and Elizabeth. He knows his plans for us.

And he has plans for us and even for our little ones, even in the womb. It's a lovely thought, isn't it? If you're expecting a baby at the moment. Alex has been preaching these last few weeks.

They're expecting a baby and it's just about the same stage as John the Baptist was in this story.

Isn't that a wonderful thought, Alex? You're downstairs, you can't see me. But God has plans for our little children even when they're unborn.

And we're to lay hold of these great promises. We're not to reject them as Zechariah did at first.

We're not to say, oh that's impossible, that sort of thing. We're to take God at his word.

[20 : 50] We're to lead our children into their destiny for him even from before they were born. And John's parents are a great example to us in this. See, yeah, Zechariah had to be rebuked at first but he did take the rebuke, didn't he?

He learned. And he did lay hold on John's true destiny. He named him John as the angel had commanded. He grasped hold at last like Elizabeth did of the great promises of God for this child who was born for mission, who was conceived to be a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's a very, very great assurance for any of us here who are Christian parents, isn't it? Or people who are soon to be parents or hope to be parents. We can trust God's purposes for our children too.

That's why we baptize our infants. It's just us answering in faith to the promise that God has given that God will touch their lives even of babes and infants, even in the womb. It's the answer of believers.

It's just saying what Mary says in verse 45 or what Elizabeth says of Mary that she believed the promise that they believed that there would be a fulfillment of what God had promised for her.

[22 : 07] Our God is a wonderful God who has great purposes of grace for his people. He brings human beings together in marriage for the purpose of serving the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He brings little ones to birth. He forms them together fearfully and wonderfully in the womb that they should fulfill a destiny from their very conception, from their birth, of being born to serve the glory of Jesus Christ.

Because as Paul says in Romans, from him and to him and for him are all things. That means every moment of every day of our lives, every relationship we have, every fruit of all that we are and do.

And for those with families, the greatest fruit of all of that surely is their children. So let's rejoice in the promise of God made certain in our Lord Jesus Christ.

God makes promises and he keeps them. And it should bring us great joy. And let's rejoice in all that that means for our own faith and also for the faith and the calling of our little ones, even those yet unborn.

[23 : 19] The God who can touch the lives of infants and even embryos is a God who can shape and mold and do wonderful things with your life and even with the lives of the little ones that you set your love on.

That's something rather wonderful to think about and to fill our hearts with this week, isn't it? Well, we'll come back to this passage next week, but let's pray together. Lord, we thank you that you've known us from before the foundation of this world.

You've loved us and you will love us to the last. Help us, we pray, to grasp hold of the sheer wonder of the things that you can do and help us to be like Mary, those who believe that there will indeed be a fulfillment of what is spoken to us in Christ in the gospel of your Son.
For we ask it in his name. Amen.