



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

So Good I Could Sing?

SCRIPTURE:
Luke 1:39-55

December 11, 2022 – Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Gabriel departs and Mary makes a bee-line (as my grandmother used to say) to Zechariah and Elizabeth's house. Elizabeth and Zechariah are also expecting a child. Elizabeth will give birth to John the Baptist. They are old. They are the oldest couple at the Presbyterian Home. When Zechariah learned that in his old age, he would become a father, he was a bit surprised. As a result, Gabriel struck Zechariah mute. Don't mess with Gabriel. Nevertheless, this is a meeting of two women, both of whom are shocked to be carrying a child. Mary barely reaches the driveway before Elizabeth explodes in joy.

"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? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy..."

She goes on so much, you wonder if Zechariah being struck mute actually changed any conversation patterns at home. It's fair to say these women are overjoyed.

I am drawn to this moment of joy because for much of my life, I was not the most joyful person in the world. I was a happy person and why not? My life has given me more than enough reasons to be happy. When life is good, it's easy to be happy. But happiness and joy are not the same thing. They are cousins in the human-disposition family, but they are not identical.

Happiness results from good things in life. Positive circumstances. Joy runs deeper. Joy comes from trusting that the love that defines the world has called your name. Joy lives when life is shaped less by what the world has done to us and more by what

God has done for us. That is the joy these women share. It is not lighthearted, carefree, la dee dah. It is an act of defiance in a broken world.

David Wythe describes joy as a "deep form of love."¹ Joy is relational. So, I don't think it is an accident that this joy emerges when these women are together.

A few years ago, I was rereading Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's final sermon. It was April 3, 1968. In less than 24 hours, he would be assassinated. Like Moses standing on Mt. Nebo, King told that weary crowd, "God has allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land."² And that room—still wet from the thunderstorm they braved to get there and still beaten down by the storm of Jim Crow—erupted in joy.

Those last words of King are quite famous, but I had never noticed the first words he spoke that night. Ralph Abernathy had introduced King and King stood up and said, "It's always good to have your closest friend... say something good about you. And Ralph is the best friend that I have in the world."³ I don't know, but I think the hope, courage and joy that King exuded was at least in part shaped by the fact that he had a friend who understood that God was at work in them.

I think joy breathes when we know there's a friend in the world with whom we share the love of God. It's no accident that Mary seeks out Elizabeth. It's also no surprise that when they meet, they sing. There's a lot of singing in the Christmas story. The story reads like it was written for the family von Trapp—with music breaking out with every new plot development.

1 David Wythe, *Consolations* (2015) p. 128.

2 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Testament of Hope," (1968) 286.

3 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Testament of Hope," (1968) 279.

The angels show up and burst into song. Zechariah breaks his long silence with singing. Even the old man Simeon bows out with a song of God's love for all. But the showstopper comes from Mary, "My soul magnifies the Lord... and he has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly... and filled the hungry with good things."

It reads like a musical, but there is an important difference. You know that "There's a Place for Us" is from "West Side Story," and "You'll Be Back" is from "Hamilton," and that "Oklahoma" is, well, from "Oklahoma." The songs are written for the show. But Luke places in the mouths of the angels, Zechariah and Mary, not songs written for this story, but old hymns that everyone would know. Old hymns that had been sung before—particularly sung during times of heartbreak and struggle. Old hymns that tell of God's grace even in the storm.

New Testament scholar Raymond Brown believes that these hymns came from Jewish Christians known as the Anawim. Brown says the Anawim were "those who could not rely on their own strength but had to rely in utter confidence upon God—the lowly, the poor, the sick, the downtrodden, the widows and orphans."⁴

We know from our own experience, the oppressed sing differently. It's not just the blues, as powerful as they may be. No, it's often from the bottom that we discover most clearly our reasons for hope and our reasons for joy. I can't fully explain that. But I know it

to be true. It is from the darkest nights that we learn our lives are shaped not by what the world has done to us, but by what God has done *for* us.

Were Luke to meet with us today... first of all, I would invite him to preach. I think I know what he might say. He would tell us that in those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus and all the world should be registered. And Joseph went from Nazareth in Galilee to Judea to the City of David, which is called Bethlehem. And while there, Mary gave birth and laid her son in a manger. And shepherds came and angels sang.

And then he would invite us to sing... to sing songs that remind us that even in the darkest hours, God calls us by name. So we might sing, "Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come, tis grace has brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home."

Or maybe, "We shall overcome, we shall overcome, we shall overcome some day." Or maybe, as we will do, in just a moment, "My soul cries out with a joyful shout that the God of my heart is great. My heart shall sing of the day you bring, let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn."

When we remember that we are defined not by what the world has done to us, but what God has done for us, it gives birth to a joy that is so palpable we just can't keep from singing.

4 Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (1977) p. 351.