

Be Amazed... Joy is Possible

Luke 1:39-56

Excuse me, but I must do this before I forget (dial phone)

Hey, St. Pete, it's me Lynne, is God available?

Oh! It's You!! (gotta love a divine being that answers His own phone)

Of course, you knew it was me. The reason for my call? Well, Sir, you know how things have been going down here lately. Yes Sir, I can't imagine things getting any worse, but the thing is I can't see them getting any better either.

Let's face it, the world leaders haven't been able to stop all the nonsense going on with wars between nations, terrorist attacks, and the like. And despite their best-efforts governments and the Church have hardly been able to make a dent in drug, alcohol, and domestic abuse; not to mention homelessness and poverty, too. That doesn't even begin to address the lack of clean drinking water and famine around the world, climate change leading to natural disasters, and.... well, You know what all's been going on down here.

What am I getting at? Well, it's all so bleak I was wondering, Lord, can you send us some joy? You do deliver, don't you? Good. Deliver to earth and make it fast!

Thank you! (I wonder how you tip for that?!)

Did you ever wish you could just call God, tell Him what you want and have Him deliver it ASAP? I know I have! And why not? The US Postal Service, UPS, and FedEx all promise overnight delivery. If they can deliver that fast, surely God can. Of course, He can and He does, sometimes. What we need to keep in mind is that God delivers on His own schedule and in His own way.

This is something God's people have struggled with from the beginning of time. Beginning with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden when God promised that the woman's seed would crush the serpent's head, then the promise continued to Abraham and his descendants. The promise continued through the Exodus, through the judges, and to the reign of the kings. Even while in exile in Babylon, God's people looked for the promised Messiah. When they eventually returned to Jerusalem, no doubt they were looking for Messiah to restore Israel and Judah to their former splendor.

To the very end of the recorded books of the Old Testament the prophets spoke of His coming and the people waited impatiently, but it would still be another 400 years before the long-awaited promise would be fulfilled.

In the Book of Luke, we find a very detailed telling of the story of the Nativity. The story is a tale of joyful deliveries. The first delivery came from an angel of the Lord while Zechariah was serving in the Holy of Holies in the

Temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah, selected by lot, was burning incense before the Ark of the Covenant and was the only person who could enter that court without fearing death. Alone in this room Zechariah encountered the angel who told him that he and his barren wife, Elizabeth, were going to have a son. When he expressed his disbelief at this news, Zechariah was struck dumb and told that he would not regain his speech until the child was born. Do you wonder why a priest, especially given the honor to burn incense in the Holy of Holies, would doubt the word of God? Could it be that after all those years of being childless, he doubted God's ability to deliver on his prayer for a child? Yet, despite his unbelief Zechariah and Elizabeth learn they will have a child in their later life.

A few months and a few towns removed, a young woman named Mary was also the recipient of a holy message delivered by the Angel Gabriel. The message was about a baby to be born miraculously through her. She accepted this mysterious gift and pledged herself to the Lord's purpose. How is it that this simple country girl, fully aware of the stigma she would have attached to her and her child, would readily accept the angel's word, when Zechariah, who ministered directly to God, could not?

I find this an interesting comparison. Zechariah had nothing to lose by having a son and stood to gain a few things. Children were considered a blessing

from the Lord. Having a son in his late life would show God's favor on him and his wife. Elizabeth would no longer be called barren by others. To be barren in ancient Israel was considered to have been cursed by God for some gross fault in yourself. This would prove to everyone that Elizabeth was not cursed and was indeed blessed by God. Yet even though there was no seeming downside to this news, Zechariah asked for a sign from the angel that his word was true. Instead of jumping for joy and running out to the waiting crowd to tell them the good news, Zechariah ends up being rendered mute until the birth of his child.

Young Mary on the other hand had truly little to gain and everything to lose by accepting Gabriel's proposal that she carry the Son of God in her womb. As an unmarried woman she knew that a pregnancy would bring shame on her family. She could be thrown out of her home by her parents. Although engaged, her future husband, Joseph, had the option to divorce her due to her pregnancy. And Mosaic Law was harsh on those who broke God's moral codes. It was possible that Mary could even lose her life by being stoned by the townspeople, including her own family members. How could she experience joy in her circumstances?

At this point I invite you to some reflection, who would you be? Would you be a Zechariah or a Mary? In Zechariah's defense, he was not given proof of

God's ability to deliver the way Mary was when Gabriel told her about Elizabeth's pregnancy. Although as a priest he should have been well versed in the story of Abraham and Sarah and how the Lord blessed them with a child in their old age. Could it be that Zechariah believed it to be just an old story the people told and not something that happened anymore, in those modern times of 3 BC?

In this time of Advent, we are preparing for the coming of the Christ-child, God's joyful gift to the world. Are we truly anticipating God's Messiah coming to save the world or have we, too, become jaded from years of hearing the same old stories? Do we respond with disbelief like Zechariah or with wide wonder like Mary? I must confess I'm probably more like Zechariah. I would guess a few of you here today might identify with him, too. Do not despair, though, if you can identify more with Zechariah because this story is not over.

There are more joyful deliveries yet to come. After receiving her exciting news from the angel Gabriel, Mary headed out to visit her relative, Elizabeth. Mary was greeted at the door by Elizabeth who delivered a word of prophesy, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth delivered words the people had waited to hear for generations: He is coming! God's Messiah is coming now in our time, in

this place. Good News! God is delivering on His promise of sending His Messiah.

Elizabeth's words encourage Mary to deliver wonderful words of praise to the Lord for the work He was doing in her and Elizabeth's lives. In these verses Mary sums up the blessings God has delivered to his people through thousands of years of history. Hear how Eugene Peterson tells her story in *The Message*:

⁴⁶ ... I'm bursting with God-news;

⁴⁷ I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.

⁴⁸ God took one good look at me, and look what happened— I'm the most fortunate woman on earth! What God has done for me will never be forgotten,

⁴⁹ the God whose very name is holy, set apart from all others.

⁵⁰ His mercy flows in wave after wave on those who are in awe before him.

⁵¹ He bared his arm and showed his strength, scattered the bluffing braggarts.

⁵² He knocked tyrants off their high horses, pulled victims out of the mud.

⁵³ The starving poor sat down to a banquet; the callous rich were left out in the cold.

⁵⁴ He embraced his chosen child, Israel; he remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high.

⁵⁵ It's exactly what he promised, beginning with Abraham and right up to now.

With great joy, she praises God for what he has done for her “a handmaiden of low estate.” She praises Him for his mercies to His people from generation to generation. She praises Him for delivering His people from their enemies. She praises Him for delivering from oblivion the House of David which was once mighty and had become as low as a country girl, who would eventually give birth in a stable. She praises Him for delivering on His promises to Abraham and all the generations of God’s people.

God was true to His word. God delivered. God delivered joy. What does that mean for us today? I believe it is a reminder that we are to look for God everywhere in our lives. He delivers joy in Christmas cards from friends and family members we don’t get to see regularly. He delivers hope through the food pantry and Friendship House Day Care Center here at Hatfield Church of the Brethren. He delivers healing to the souls of those who sincerely cry out to Him in their pain and loneliness. He delivers leaders with visions of a better future for our cities, states, nation, and the world. He delivers quiet strength through His servants wherever they are called to serve in the world. And that brings me back to us.

Just as the US Postal Service, UPS, and FedEx depend on the people who serve in their ranks to make deliveries, so God depends on us to be His hands and feet here in this place and time, just as Elizabeth and Mary helped in the delivery of John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ into the world. God has deliveries to make, and He needs people today to respond just as Mary did so long ago by saying, “Let it be to me according to Your word.”

When you hear God calling your name and asking you to make a delivery for Him, how will you respond? Will you be like Zechariah who responded to the angel by asking for a sign? Or will you be like Mary, who with the innocence of youth, simply responded to God saying, “Let it be so.” Whichever person we choose to be, may God use us –

To bring good news to the afflicted;

To bind up the brokenhearted,

To proclaim liberty to captives

And freedom to prisoners (Isa. 61:1)

May we share the joy of the Lord with all we meet.

Please join me for a word of prayer:

Father God,

You are the Great Deliverer. You deliver us from our enemies, you deliver us from calamities, you deliver us from pain, suffering, and grief. You especially deliver us from ourselves, making us holy so that we may one day be with you, and You do all these things through a baby born in a manger so long ago. You delivered us the joy of your salvation through your Son, Jesus Christ. Lord, we ask that You allow us to join with you in delivering your mercy, justice, and joy in this time and place. We ask that as we approach the New Year, you will show us where you would have us deliver Your grace and mercy. We ask these things in the name of the child born of Mary, Jesus, Messiah. AMEN

Lynne McMullan Allebach

12/14/2025 Hatfield Church of the Brethren