

2025 Advent Week 3 Joy

We started our Advent season focusing our thoughts and prayers on biblical Hope. Biblical hope is not just wishful thinking about things we have no control over. Biblical hope has God as its author, source, sustaining power, and object. Because hope is God-grounded, God-sustained, and God-directed, hope is a reality in which God's people may dwell. Hope is the response of God's people to God's activity in their lives. Biblical hope is expectation expressed in faith, confidence, patience, endurance, and eagerness. Our hope is an anchor of the soul, sure and steadfast, which enables us to bear our burdens and infuses strength when we are weak and worn.

Last week we focused on biblical Peace. Biblical peace is more than the absence of strife or conflict. It is an attitude of tranquility despite adversity. The Hebrew word for peace, *Shalom*, goes far beyond not fighting with others, or peace as we often think of it. *Shalom* is, in essence, how things are meant to be: a slice of heaven in the chaotic here-and-now that we live in. The peace of God allows us to look at others through heaven's eyes and help guide the world to see God's here and not-yet here kingdom. Peace from God, biblical peace, allows us to trust in God's promises, through restful, tranquil faith, despite the dark, scary world around us.

This week we turn our thoughts and prayers to biblical Joy. We may usually associate joy with momentary happiness--like the happiness a child might experience when they unwrap a gift they'd hoped for on Christmas day. However, biblical joy cannot be deterred by present circumstances. This type of joy comes from God alone. It is an eager anticipation about wonderful things to come. This is the joy the angels announced to the Bethlehem shepherds, good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

We live in a world that has already experienced the miraculous birth, perfect sinless life of Jesus, atoning death, miraculous resurrection, glorious ascension, empowering grace-gift of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those who confess Jesus as the only way, truth, and life. But at the time of Jesus birth, God's people had been waiting centuries for Him to send the promised Messiah.

Eight hundred years before a Roman emperor decreed a census, sending a man with his pregnant betrothed to Bethlehem, the prophet Micah foretold-

Micah 5:2

"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

And seven hundred years before that glorious night in Bethlehem, the prophet Isaiah foretold-
Isaiah 7:14

¹⁴ Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Into a land conquered and occupied by Romans, God was about about to fulfill one of His promises. The King of the Universe is tip-toeing down a back stairway of heaven, with a baby in His arms . . . to bring Joy to the world.

<Transition to Gayla>

Luke 1

While our culture tends to rush into the indulgence and hustle of the Christmas season, Advent is a season that slows us down, asks us to wait, and trains our hearts to live in expectancy. Instead of skipping straight to celebration, Advent teaches us that the waiting itself is holy ground.

Advent, it seems, is a paradox. On one hand, we wait in the shadows, and on the other, we strain toward the bright horizon of hope. To wait in the shadows is to sit with what is unfinished—unanswered prayers, silence, and uncertainty. It means not knowing how everything will unfold and feeling the ache of that in-between space. And yet, even there, we lift our eyes toward the horizon and grip onto God's promise that He is not done. Delight is an expression of hope, peace and choosing joy sometimes long before we see the fullness of the promise come to pass

I read something not too long ago that described Advent as "a time of commitment and expectant delight." That line stopped me in my tracks. I'd heard Advent described with words like waiting, longing, or anticipation. But delight? Christmas, yes—but not Advent. Yet I started to wonder, could there be delight in the waiting?

So, I did some digging in the scripture— Here is what I found.

Two gospel women, Elizabeth and Mary, model exactly this. Let's dig in here-

First – let's look at Elizabeth – and we have to look at Zechariah to see the whole story. In the very beginning of Luke's gospel is where we find our story of Elizabeth and Zechariah unfolding. They were both from priestly lineage it says in Luke 1:5. They were both righteous in fact v6-7 tells us "and they were both righteous before God, walking, blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord. BUT they had no child because Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years."

We can guess that Elizabeth must have felt broken, sorrowful and to blame. V25 tells us that she felt stigma and shame.

- Y'all our disappointments will either make us bitter or strengthen our faith and allow joy to override what seems hopeless.
- Our disappointments if we let them, have a way of producing terrible theology and can cause us to deny God's goodness. We may say or even think things like "I know God is good but...."
- In Elizabeth and Zechariah's case,
 - the striking thing is that they handled a lifelong disappointment and social shame with righteousness and blamelessness before God.
 - They served God even though they did not have what they wanted....

Being righteous and blameless does not mean a challenge-free life, exemption from heartaches, or that every desire will be granted.

- If you serve God for what you can get, then you actually serve yourself.
- That, y'all, is the prosperity gospel, not the biblical gospel.
- The righteous person is not free from suffering because he or she serves the Lord.

- We do not get everything we want just because we obey the LORD.
- We may live well past the years of possibility (like Elizabeth) without receiving our hope; but if we are God's people, we must choose to live pointing to HIM because God is our hope and our joy is in HIM.
 - The joy of the Lord is our strength. Nehemiah 8:10

Elizabeth and Zechariah endured this very test. Their examples provoke us to ask...

Will we serve God faithfully through our disappointments?

No child. No husband. No dream job. No dream You fill in the blank.

OR — Will HE mean more to us than all those things even though we receive none of them?

Let's look back at our story... (v8) It's Zechariah's appointed time to serve as priest before GOD with his division, the division of Abijah. And it says he was chosen by lot — he drew the lucky straw to burn incense in the temple. Just coincidence? - NO WAY!! GOD ordained every detail!

- Read v11 – 15a
- The angel..... brings really good news and tells Zechariah all the amazing things about his future son...
- but Zechariah's response is, "How can I know this?"
 - Seeing and hearing an angel is not enough?
 - You want more proof!?
 - In verses 19–20 the angel is like,
 - Man, don't you know who I am?
 - Don't you know who I work for?
 - You want a sign?
 - I tell you what, since you like to question GOD's word, I will close your mouth until the whole promise is fulfilled.

Y'all- when our eyes are on our problems—in Zechariah's case, his and Elizabeth's old age—we will not receive GOD's word or trust GOD's power.

We can't think OUR problems are great AND GOD's power is great at the same time.

That doesn't make sense— "That math don't math"

We will exalt one a little bit more than the other.

We can be so focused on OUR problems, that we can't hear GOD's promises

And we fail to believe God's power.

Did you know you can block out the noonday sun with a coin? All you have to do is hold the coin out, closing one eye and bring the coin closer right up to your eye. We sometimes hold our problems and limitations to our eyes in that way, bringing them so close to our eyes we cannot see the great, glowing sun of God's promises and God's power. To put it another way, we can't see The SON moving and working in our lives because we have fixed our eyes on something lesser. Hebrews 12:2 tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus the author of our faith who for the joy (chara) set before HIM, endured the cross.

Tom Keller says it like this "the sin under all other sins is a lack of joy in Christ Jesus".

When our eyes are on our problems, we will not remember God's Word and how it applies to us.

- Why did Zechariah not remember Abraham in Genesis 17:17?
- Abraham was in the exact same situation—wanting a child but he and his wife were far too old. God gave Abraham and Sarah a son when they were nearly a hundred years old!
- Zechariah should have remembered God's word, but he was focused on his limitation instead.

Zechariah wants more proof than the Scriptures

more proof than an angel visiting him.

He wants proof rather than the promise.

In that way, this righteous man chose to walk by sight, NOT by faith....

We can be righteous persons
in the holiest places,
carrying out the holiest acts of worship,
and not believe God!
***Unbelief is that sneaky!

It can slither right into the middle of spiritual worship and rob you of joy, hope and peace.

You can be a preacher preaching the gospel and not believe anyone will be saved.

You can be sharing the gospel with your neighbors or coworkers and not believe anyone will listen.

You can be married and not believe your spouse is a gift from the Lord.

We can pray for our heart's deepest desire and laced into our prayer is a sneaky unbelief. That was Zechariah, and if we are honest that is many of us.

Let's not make God close our mouths because of unbelief.

As we continue our story, Elizabeth, old and weary after decades, y'all- decades, not years of barrenness, finds her womb alive with promise. She states in v25 that the LORD has looked on me and taken away my reproach, my disgrace.

It's now six months after Elizabeth had conceived.

- We've moved from Jerusalem north to the region of Galilee to a city called Nazareth.
- We've switched from the religious capital of the country to a small, backwater town with a bad reputation. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).
- We're told in verse 27 that this young woman, Mary, was a virgin engaged to Joseph, a descendant of King David.
 - To be engaged in those days was stronger than in our day. You couldn't break an engagement without getting a divorce for sexual immorality.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are at the end of their long lives, while Mary and Joseph are beginning theirs.

- What God does in the world has nothing to do with our ages or our hometowns.
- God uses whomever HE wills whenever HE wants

Gabriel greets Mary with words of grace, v. 28 when he says "Greetings, O favored one."

- God is smiling on this young, unknown girl.
- We might be tempted to think Zechariah was chosen because he was righteous and a priest.
- The angel's greeting to Mary reveals she is chosen solely as a matter of God's grace.

Mary doesn't understand the angel's greeting. It says she "was deeply troubled" (original language means perplexed/alarmed) by it and tried to figure out what kind of greeting it was (v. 29). How could she, an unknown young woman, be described by God in this way?

- Did you ever feel like your life is too small for God to notice,
- too insignificant for God to be aware of you?
- Perhaps that's how Mary felt.

Just as with Zechariah, the angel explains his message (vv. 30–33). Not only would Zechariah and Elizabeth give birth to the promised forerunner, but Mary would give birth to the promised Savior.

- Gabriel promises she too will conceive.
- She should name him Jesus, which according to Matthew 1:21 implies, "He will save his people from their sins."

- Mary's son will actually be "the Son of the Most High" (v. 32). He will be God's own Son.
- This Son will fulfill the promise made to King David hundreds of years earlier (2 Sam 7). This will be David's son who rules over Israel forever in an everlasting kingdom.

Now Mary sounds a lot like Zechariah (v18) when she replies in verse 34, "How will this be, since I'm a virgin"

- but apparently there's no unbelief in her question.
- She's not asking, "Can you do it?"
- She's asking, "How will you do it?"
- Her question builds on faith, not unbelief.
- This is why Gabriel does not rebuke Mary as he did Zechariah.

The angel assures Mary and assures us,

- "Nothing will be impossible with God" (v. 37).
 - Also Jeremiah 32:27; Matthew 19:26
- The moment you admit the existence of God, you must deny the impossible.
- With God it's nothing that an elderly barren woman and a virgin teenage girl would both conceive.
 - In fact, that's just like God!

Now contrast Mary's response to Zechariah's:

- Where Zechariah stumbled in unbelief-
- Mary yields in faith. V38 "Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word"
 - Doesn't she sound a lot like Isaiah saying, "Here I am. Send me" (Isa 6:8)?
 - Doesn't she sound a lot like Esther saying, "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16)?
 - Doesn't she sound a lot like Ruth saying to Naomi, "Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God" (Ruth 1:16)?
 - It brings to mind Job's, "Even if he kills me, I will hope in him" (Job 13:15).
 - It reminds us of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane praying, "Father, ... not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42).
 - This is how faith-filled people respond to God's plan, even when they do not understand it.

What must Mary have thought about the Lord's plan?

- The only way a person can genuinely say what Mary says is to believe that YHWH's plan is better than our plans for ourselves.
- When Mary responds in faith,
 - she faces the potential of public shame.
 - She faces the prospect of a divorce or a broken betrothal
 - The possibility of never marrying.
 - She would likely wear the scarlet letter of her day and
 - be forced from home and family.
 - She would be destitute.

Though she faced all of this, Mary spoke in faith. She concluded, "Whatever your will is for me, let it be."

- Like Mary, we can't truly be servants of Christ unless we accept HIS plan for our lives.
- HE cannot be our LORD if we insist on ruling ourselves.
- If HE is LORD, then we are servants duolos—glad servants of YHWH.
- This is how faith replies to grace.
- When GOD announces HIS plan for your life, say, "Yes, LORD, Amen! Let it be so! Not my will, but YOUR will be done, GOD!"

Mary also learned from Gabriel that her cousin Elizabeth was six months pregnant. Elizabeth had kept her pregnancy hidden for five months (v. 24). Now Mary knows and she travels to the hill country in Judah to visit her cousin.

These two women meet together and erupt with joy. They're not just joyful because they're both having babies. No. They know the Lord has shown them favor. They know the inside scoop on God's plans for their children. Their joy is supernatural.

V41 tells us that when she hears Mary's greeting, Elizabeth, is filled with the Holy Spirit and gets loud and blesses Mary as well as her baby, Jesus, in the womb.

- Once Mary walks into the room, Elizabeth announces (without prior communication) that Mary carries her LORD.
- Yall – did you hear that —Elizabeth confesses JESUS is The LORD even before JESUS is born
- Even John, the unborn child, leaps for joy in his mother's womb when Mary, carrying Jesus in her womb, enters the room.
- It's a joyful celebration!!!

After Elizabeth makes her confession that baby JESUS is truly the LORD, Mary erupts into song and magnifies the LORD.

Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in GOD my Savior, for He has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed: for HE who is mighty has done great things for me, and Holy is HIS Name. And His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength in his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things. And the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

- What does that word magnify mean in the original language? (megalyno)- [meg-al-oo'-no]
- Means to make great, esteem highly, exalt, magnify, to celebrate, to give glory and praise...
- Mary worships!!!!— she worships GOD in the middle of it all.
- She chooses joy – v47 tells us she sings "my soul rejoices in GOD, my Savior"
- She sings a beautiful song filled with hope and rich truth about who GOD is.

Worship in the midst of uncertainty, when the future feels fragile and unclear, is perhaps one of the most powerful ways we prepare for CHRIST JESUS in our lives. To lift our voices in praise and set our gaze on the KING when the world feels heavy, discouraging, or overwhelming is an act of fierce hope and pure joy!!!

Worship is a way of making room. It shifts our attention from fear to faith, from scarcity to abundance, from ourselves to the SAVIOR. This story invites us to prepare HIM room through worship that refuses to be silenced by hardship.

Christ was born as promised.

He lived a sinless life.

He offered righteousness to God in our place.

He died a sinner's death, suffering the wrath of God in our place on Calvary's cross.

He satisfied God's anger, and three days later God raised him from the dead

—proving that the Father accepted the Son's sacrifice on our behalf.

Now God calls all men everywhere to repent of their sins and to trust in JESUS as their LORD and SAVIOR. The Father's mercy comes to all of us through HIS Son.

We should praise GOD for keeping HIS promises even before we see the promises fulfilled. That's what these women of faith do.

Mary, young and vulnerable, risks her reputation, her marriage, even her life, as she carries the Messiah, the Son of God. Both women faced uncertainty, risk, and loss. Imagine how easy it would have been to hunker down, live in survival

mode, and cling to one another out of desperation or fear. Or, to grit their teeth, push through, pressing forward with guarded hearts and closed hands. But not these women. Delight broke through. Joy was overflowing!

Elizabeth's child leapt for joy in her womb. (Luke 1:41 & 44)

Mary burst into song. (Luke 1:46-55)

For these women, their hope didn't look like stoic endurance;

- it looked like delight and celebration.
- It looked like making room for joy in the messy middle of their story.
- No guarantees.
- No certainties about the future.
- Only the wild, defiant choice to rejoice right where they were.

You know we often associate hope with dark times, holding on through hardship or bracing against disappointment. And yes, hope is exactly that.

- But what if hope is also the doorway to joy?
- What if fierce hope doesn't just survive the night, but makes space for singing in the middle of it, like Mary and Elizabeth?
- Advent reminds us that hope is not only endurance—
 - it is joyful expectation, song, and even laughter that dares to erupt before the story is resolved.

I can recall times when I sensed God gently inviting me to praise Him, to celebrate, to cultivate and choose joy—in the very middle of what felt like a nightmare and the darkest night of my life.

- It felt foolish, maybe even reckless. And yet, that is often the way of HIS kingdom.
- Joy in the midst of our uncertain circumstances is a stamp of YHWH's people.
- Because our hope doesn't reside in our circumstances but in the ONE Who Is Emmanuel, GOD with us, in all moments, in every situation...

Advent is not just about waiting in the dark.

It's about letting hope give birth to joy right now.

To delight before the miracle is complete.

Lord, in the shadows of waiting and the ache of uncertainty, give us the courage to choose joy even before the story is resolved. Like Mary and Elizabeth, let our hearts leap and our voices sing—confident that YOU are Emmanuel, GOD with us, even here.

<Transition to Gus>

So if you have ever confessed your sin to Jesus and accepted Him as your Savior and Lord, you can find the real, true, biblical joy Gayla has been describing. Even if your current life is a mess and you feel that joy is a billion miles away, you can confess your unconfessed sins to Jesus and restore your broken fellowship with God.

And if you have never confessed Jesus as your Savior and Lord, you can do that and begin to walk your walk with Him, a walk that makes possible true joy that is not dependent on how you feel.

Most people can recall their decision to confess Jesus as Lord and Savior as part of the realization that they were a sinner in need of redemption. This might have happened last week, or decades ago, or when you were very young. If you cannot remember a time when you realized your need for redemption and prayed to be saved, you can do it right now.

HERE IS HOW YOU CAN RECEIVE CHRIST:

Admit your need. (*I am a sinner.*)

Be willing to turn from your sins (*repent*) and ask for God's forgiveness.

Believe that Jesus Christ died for you on the cross and rose from the grave.

Through prayer, invite Jesus Christ to come in and control your life through the Holy Spirit. (*Receive Jesus as Lord and Savior*)

We suggest a prayer like this one:

"Dear God, I know I am a sinner. I want to turn from my sins, and I ask for Your forgiveness. I believe that Jesus Christ is Your Son. I believe He died for my sins and that You raised Him to life. I want Him to come into my heart and to take control of my life. I want to trust Jesus as my Savior and follow Him as my Lord from this day forward. In Jesus' Name, amen."

Whether you prayed a prayer like that just now, or last week, or last month, or last year, or fifty years ago, congratulations on receiving a new eternal life in fellowship with God and other believers. If are not yet a Christian, please speak to Pastor John or any of the church staff so we can talk with you further.

We will conclude this Advent study with a prayer and the lighting of the pink candle representing Joy.

Advent Week 3 Prayer-Joy

Heavenly Father,

This third week of Advent let us remember that the good news of Jesus' birth has the power to bring us great joy this Christmas season. Our joy isn't dependent on what is going on in our life, in our world, or the people that we are with. It doesn't depend on the gifts we give or the gifts we find under the tree. No earthly thing can ever give us complete joy. Our joy comes from you. That joy that flooded the hearts of the shepherds, the angels, the wise men, the hosts of heaven, and Mary and Joseph is the joy that still has the power to overwhelm our hearts with rejoicing. Those who gathered around the new baby were blessed because they believed that you had fulfilled your promises. Mary and Joseph believed and were able to feel the joy of holding baby Jesus in their arms. The shepherds and wise men believed the angels and the signs and experienced the great gladness of worshipping their Messiah. Those who knew Him and recognized Him were overjoyed at the coming of Jesus. They saw

the prophecies fulfilled and their fear was replaced with happiness as they gazed on the face of the one who would be their Savior. They trusted in your promises and their hearts were filled with gladness as they watched your loving-kindness manifested in the face of a tiny baby in a lowly manger. Father, you offer that same joy to us now if we know you and recognize and confess Jesus as our Savior and Lord. You gave us a reason to celebrate when you gave us the unspeakable gift of Jesus Christ. You came to dwell among us. You went to Calvary's cross for us. You overcame death and rose from the dead for us. You forgive our sins and give us eternal life when we believe in you. Our joy doesn't come from our jobs, our family, our relationships, our finances, or our earthly success. Our joy doesn't come from what we have on earth or who we are with. Our joy is a gift. It is the gift that you gave us that first Christmas in Jesus Christ. Our joy is encompassed in our Savior, King Jesus. Flood our heart with joy this Advent season as we reflect on the good news of Jesus' birth. In Jesus' precious name we pray. Amen