

## Jumping for Joy

Luke 1:39-56

Tappahannock Presbyterian Church

December 8, 2013

Did you watch the World Series this fall? I bet a lot of you did. I'm sure you saw the highlights on the news. What happened after the final out of the last game? You remember it: the players were jumping up and down, in a big celebration in the middle of the field. You've seen this jumping before; you've seen it at the end of the Super Bowl, by the winners in the NBA championship series, by the players in all kinds of wins in college sports. The only sport you *won't* see it in is hockey, because, you know, you can't jump on skates! What is it about us, that when we get exhilarated, we want to jump?

Oh, we don't jump for just any old thing. Winning a baseball game in July isn't the same as winning a World Series. I think it has to do with a sense of accomplishment, the attaining of some long-awaited, long sought-after goal. They play 162 games in a major league season. Then two sets of playoffs, and finally a best-of-seven World Series. If you can get through all that, no wonder you'd jump up and down!

Jumping when excited isn't confined to sports. Even in the Bible, we know that there was this jumping for joy. Second Samuel chapter 6 describes David "leaping and dancing before the Lord." In Isaiah 35, a prophecy about joy, we read that "then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." And Jesus himself says, in the sixth chapter of Luke, "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven." When you get good news of some kind, don't you feel yourself gathering up to jump? Do you remember the Toyota advertisement a few years ago? There was a guy standing by some kind of Toyota, jumping straight up in the air in

slow-motion while the announcer says, “Oh what a feeling!” They were supposed to be jumping for joy because they were buying a Toyota! I bet that joy lasted until the first payment was due. Now I shouldn’t say that! Maybe that jumping guy had saved up his money for years and years, and he finally had enough. He’d finally reached his goal; and he’d just bought the thing he’d sought after for so long.

So there are all the elements: something long awaited, long sought after; something finally gained or attained; ecstatic joy at finally arriving at that long-awaited day.

See, in the background of this passage we know that Elizabeth and Zechariah, John the Baptist’s parents, had made it most of the way to their long awaited day. Elizabeth was going to have a baby! And Elizabeth was no spring chicken – she was well past child-bearing age, just like Abraham’s wife Sarah had been. This was a miraculous deal, here. EVERYBODY knew about it. You knew that there would be a great celebration, probably with lots of jumping for joy, when the child was born. There was, too, according to Luke. All the neighbors “rejoiced and celebrated” with her and Zechariah. But let’s back up to where we are now, with Mary going to Elizabeth’s house. Elizabeth was five months along, as we read in the text. Oh, you heard she was “in the sixth month?” They counted differently than we do. When someone was “in the sixth month,” it meant that she had finished five months, and was just starting the sixth. As modern doctors tell us, it wasn’t quite time for the baby to be kicking and making big movements, not until about the *end* of the 6th month. That sets the stage.

Now consider Mary. She just got told she was going to be carrying the Son of God. And at the end of that rather shocking news, Gabriel lays *another* shocker on her: Her cousin Elizabeth, old, old, Elizabeth, was going to have a baby, too! God is up to *something!* And for Mary, there was only one way she could find out what it might be. So she took off to wherever it was Elizabeth lived. (If you read carefully, you'll see Luke doesn't tell us.) Scholars think it was Hebron, a town about 100 miles from Nazareth. Now, think about that. Would Mary walk a hundred miles in brutal terrain just to visit her old, old aunt, to celebrate her baby's coming? Maybe those folks would have; family meant everything to them. There is, however, a bigger purpose to this visit.

The bigger purpose is revealed in what happens when Mary *walks in the door*. Right away! We don't know if the two women were known to each other on sight. I almost think it doesn't matter, because whether they did or not, God has his own sort of "greeting" in mind. We read that Mary gave a greeting. Now, how do YOU usually respond to a greeting? You usually say a greeting right back, don't you? Not this time. God intervened in a dramatic, powerful way. Now understand! Mary is barely pregnant, if you follow the timeline in the Gospel. She left right away to go to Elizabeth's, right after the angel Gabriel told her everything. There's not much there yet – at least, in human terms.

As soon as Mary greets Elizabeth, the baby in her womb LEAPS.

And nothing would be the same ever again.

Listen to the words of the Scripture! "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed

with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Yeah. Just that little seed of a savior, that was enough that John got busy doing what he was supposed to do. His jumping announced that there, in Mary's womb, was the Son of God, the one to fulfill all the promises of God. Oh, and that's not all. Listen to what Elizabeth says about her baby's jumping: "For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb *leaped for joy*." This wasn't some of the normal kicking that babies do after the first six months. We're not even to six months yet! This was a message, from God, through his prophet, John. You know how we know? It's that last part; Elizabeth clearly says he "jumped for joy." You can't know what's causing a baby to move! But Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. So she knew.

In a very real way, you can say that the ministry of our Lord Jesus began right here. His presence caused people to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and even babies to jump for joy. Just his drawing near caused the miraculous to happen.

Friends, you and I ought to be jumping for joy, because we have a savior who has not only drawn near, but has never left us, not really. He promised he'd come back for us in the Holy Spirit. And he has! I know that from time to time you really feel it.

So how come we're not jumping for joy every day? I think it's because we haven't heard the greeting. We haven't *really heard* the greeting. We've been so busy with so much, we haven't heard the greeting. We've let the noise of the world get to us so much, we haven't heard the greeting. You know why? You and I don't push ourselves very much. Look at Mary, you know, in the early stages of pregnancy, and I know some of you ladies who've had kids could tell us, those early weeks are sometimes filled with

all kinds of feeling bad, morning sickness and pains and all that. Mary didn't kick back and get Joseph to take care of her, Mary went over a hundred miles so that this powerful beginning of Jesus' ministry could take place. How can you or I push ourselves, so that we're where God wants us to be?

First, we can make the extra effort to listen for God "greeting" us, calling out to us. We can tune out the noise of the world. We get bombarded by all kinds of messages and demands. We can learn to sift out the ones that aren't helpful, and keep the ones that help us to hear God. You know that we constantly have distractions. We have all kinds of demands on our time and our devotion. We can learn how to choose the things that help us be ready for when God calls out a greeting. And then there's fear. This kind of thinking is a change for most people. And change is scary. Just think about Mary, carrying a baby, walking a hundred miles because she thought that's what God wanted her to do. That's extra effort. We need to make that extra effort so we can hear God.

Second, we can *push ourselves* to do those hard things in order to get to where God wants us to be. Mary pushed herself, and she wasn't even asked to! Gabriel just told her about Elizabeth, he didn't say, "You have to go and see her." Go back and read the text! Mary went on her own. Mary put herself in God's hands. Don't you remember what she said to Gabriel? Literally, reading the original language, she said, "Let it happen to me according to your word." And since his words were about Elizabeth bearing a miraculous child, Mary acted "in accordance" with those words, and off she went. When you determine to "let it happen according to your word," God's word, in things God wants you to do, do you see what blessings flow? what miraculous things

happen? Nobody's asking you to walk a hundred miles. Maybe all you'll have to do is walk across a room.

Third, we can take to heart that we are *already* in the presence of Jesus. In the fourteenth chapter of John's gospel, Jesus promised to send that Spirit of truth, which we know as the Holy Spirit. How often do you stop, and listen for that Spirit? Is it at least *possible* that this Spirit is calling out to you? The Psalmist had it right, in Psalm 46, when he wrote, "Be still, and know that I am God!" If you are already there, then shouldn't it be easy to hear when God calls?

See, John jumped for joy because of a couple of things. He jumped for joy because he was supposed to; he was being a prophet already. His mother Elizabeth got the message, too! John was supposed to "go before" the Messiah, to announce his coming, and so he did. But wouldn't a kick have been enough? One of those kicks babies do? No! John *had* to jump for joy because of what Jesus meant. Israel had been working, and praying, and trying to be obedient for more than 500 years. That's the time between their return from the exile and the days when Jesus and John were born. They had sought a king for themselves for so long! – only to be disappointed time and time again. Now they lived under the Romans, who were pretty good compared to other nations when it came to letting them practice their religion. But it wasn't the same. Israel longed for the return of their kingdom; when God restored it, there would be great joy. "Oh what a feeling," but on a divine scale. Now, after those 500-plus years, the day has come. God is going to finally hand over the keys. Anything besides jumping for joy wasn't going to be good enough.

What makes you jump? How about a new church for a community longing for the Good News? How about a community of believers who are willing to listen for God, to push themselves for God, and to bring the very real, very present God to those who need him so much? Now listen – as I look around here I see lots of people like me, who'd best be advised not to do any big-time jumping! There are other ways to jump. You can jump at opportunities to be God's "greeters" to those you meet. As you see all the things of Christmas, the lights and the decorations and the special programs and such, remember this part of the Christmas story, and resolve to listen for God, to push yourselves however he directs, and to BE his presence in your world. You know, if you do those things, you might just end up jumping for joy after all!