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Jesus Through the Eyes of John: He's the Lord of Joy

December 3, 2023

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TEXT: Luke 1:39-45 (ESV)

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into 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 this 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."

With Christmas approaching us, I imagine there will be a lot of Christmas specials on television for us to watch. And while I don't typically care for most of them, there is one, uh, annual Christmas show on TV that our family always watches and enjoys. Each year it's Charles Schulz's A Charlie Brown Christmas, and in this story, we find Charlie Brown depressed about the commercialism of Christmas and how hard it is to find the true Christmas spirit and meaning. The other kids and Snoopy, of course, think Charlie Brown's being silly and they ridicule him.

The turning point of the show is Charlie Brown standing on a stage with his friend Linus and crying out to no one in particular. "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" And Linus says to him, "I know what it's about, Charlie Brown." And then he recites the Christmas gospel from Luke's gospel.

The show makes a good point. During the Christmas season, many people do fall prey to being distracted by all the trimmings—the gifts, Christmas cards, shopping, trees and lights, family gatherings, the emphasis on goodwill towards one another, and sentimental music. And it's all too easy to miss the reason for the season: God's giving us the greatest gift of all, Jesus Christ. But we might give a perfunctory nod of recognition for the gift, but not really pause to ponder the beauty and value of it.

So for the next three weeks, I thought it would be helpful for us to examine God's great gift by looking at Jesus through the eyes of John the Baptist. As you know, he was the announcer of Jesus's ministry. His God-given job was to prepare the way of the Lord and bear witness about Jesus. The Gospel of John says this about him: there was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to bear witness to the light that all might believe through him. He was not the light but came to bear witness to the light.

So John the Baptist has some important insights to pass on to us as we prepare ourselves to once again celebrate the birth of Jesus. In fact, in today's text, we see him giving witness to Jesus, even from his mother Elizabeth's womb. Shortly after, the Virgin Mary received word from the angel Gabriel that she would be miraculously giving birth to Jesus, the Son of God. She went to visit her relative Elizabeth, who even in her old age was now miraculously pregnant herself. Gabriel had told Mary about this unexpected pregnancy and that it was God's doing because nothing is impossible for God. It was a sign Mary should check out, so she obediently went to see for herself. It's about a four-day hike to where Zechariah and Elizabeth were living when she arrived and greeted Elizabeth, an amazing thing happened.

Elizabeth, upon hearing Mary's greeting, felt the babe in her womb leaping around. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit like the prophets of old, suddenly became a prophetess herself and exclaimed to Mary, "Blessed are you, Mary, of all women. Blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why is this 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."

Now there are two things that jump out at us in this passage. First, Elizabeth, inspired by the Holy Spirit to discern the prophetic voice of John within her womb about who

Mary is carrying within her and whose presence Elizabeth is standing in. Listen to those words again. Why is it, Elizabeth said, "the mother of my Lord has come to me." She is sharing John's testimony as to who this Jesus is. This baby in Mary's womb is my Lord, and Lord is a title for God and for royalty. In Scripture, this would be heard as an affirmation for Mary, who was told she would give birth to the Son of God by the angel Gabriel, and that he would be one who was of King David's throne royalty. And it was in Bethlehem the shepherds heard the good news from the angels that a Savior, the Lord, had been born in the city of David. And they went and told Mary and Joseph what the angels said of. And it was an affirmation—Jesus is the Lord God in the. In some mysterious, marvelous, miraculous way. God has come into this world to dwell among his people and save them.

I find some remarkable things to rejoice about as I ponder the news of the incarnation—God becoming one of us. For instance, I'm reminded that when I bring my problems to God in prayer, he knows exactly what I am experiencing, for he himself experienced the same sort of thing in the flesh. It's kind of like that commercial campaign going on in television now. He gets us. He sympathizes, for he's been there, done that. The writer of Hebrews says, "Since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession, for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then, with confidence, draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and grace to help in time of need."

Another thing that moves me when I'm reminded of the incarnation is this: He went to a lot of trouble to draw near to us like that. So he must really love me. I mean, leaving the courts of heaven to be with us shows us the depths of his love, his commitment to us. Oh, how he loves us. He's come to bring us home to himself in the person of his son Jesus.

Now, the second thing that grabbed my attention in this story is Elizabeth's description of her baby's actions in her womb. In response to hearing Mary's greeting, she said, "For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy." Jesus' arrival brought joy to John. He's witnessing it through the Holy Spirit. He recognized the Lord, and he leaped, which was an expression of joy. Elizabeth said her baby leaped for joy—jump for joy. The original word being used here means rejoicing

greatly, expressing exuberant joy and gladness. His arrival is the cause for joy and great rejoicing. Jesus equals joy to the world.

Everybody's looking for joy in their lives, right? In fact, I know of no greater need today than the need for joy in our lives. I mean, just look around. Bad news, long faces, heavy hearts are everywhere around us. And by the way, how do you define joy? Some people equate it with happiness, but happiness doesn't really capture the fullness of that word joy. Christian author Tim Hansell, in his book "Don't Sweat It," describes the difference between joy and happiness, and I find his words helpful. He writes, "Happiness is not the same as joy because circumstances allow happiness; they can also make it dissolve into thin air. Joy, on the other hand, defies circumstances. It can coexist with doubt, ambiguity, and pain. It is a contentedness beyond circumstances and an indestructible kind of confidence. It says everything's all right, even when everything looks, feels, and tastes all wrong."

I like Hansell's description of joy and the difference between joy and happiness. Joy is contentedness beyond circumstances, having a sense of all rightness within. When everything looks so wrong, there's still a sense that everything is all right because God is present and in control.

Now, when that kind of joy comes into our life, it brings good things with it, like enthusiasm for life, a determination to hang in there, a strength and comfort even in the darkest times. In fact, we're told in Scripture that the joy of the Lord is our strength. God, you see, actually created you to have his joy working in your life.

C.S. Lewis, the great Christian apologist from the last century, once said, "Joy is the serious business of heaven," and in his autobiography, which tells of his conversion to Christianity, he entitled it "Surprised by Joy."

So John the Baptist tells us, Joy has arrived. It's available through the Lord of joy, Jesus Christ. He came that you might have joy. In fact, Jesus told his disciples as an adult in the upper room the night before his crucifixion that he wanted his joy to be in them and to the full.

Let me share this story I came across about the joy of Jesus entering a life. Blaise Pascal was a French mathematical genius who was born June 19th, 1623, and after running

from God until he was 31 years old, on November 23rd at 10:30 p.m., he met God and was proudly and unshakably converted to Jesus Christ. He wrote all of this down on a piece of paper and sewed it into his coat, where it was found after his death eight years later. Listen to what it said:

"Year of Grace 1654 Monday, the 23rd of November. Feast of Saint Clement. From about 10:30 at night to about an hour after midnight. Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob. Not a philosopher's and scholar's certitude. Heartfelt joy. Peace. God of Jesus Christ, God of Jesus Christ, my God and your God. Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy, Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, may I never be separated from him."

Wow. He was awakened to the Lord joy, wasn't he? And he's not the only one that's had an experience like that. Millions upon millions have found the Lord of Joy over the centuries and experienced his joy. People have a tendency to search for joy in other places, though, like prestige or wealth and pleasures, to name a few. And when they attain these kinds of things, they think they finally have joy. But this so-called joy is only temporary. It's fleeting. It eventually fades or is lost over time, or it's destroyed or even stolen.

But the joy that Jesus Christ came to give us cannot be taken from us, and it never ends as you live with him daily. He came to give us joy to face every situation in life. For instance, you're standing at the bed of a loved one who has just died, and you know of their trust in Christ. And of course, you're sad. You'll miss them. It's painful, but still there is within you a sense of joy because you know they are going to be with Jesus in Paradise, just as Jesus promised the repentant, dying thief on the cross next to him. And you know also that though that person is gone, you are not alone in your grief. There is present for you one who has promised, "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

You see, the Lord of joy is risen and present and always available. So the question is, how can a person receive that joy that Jesus wants to bring us? Scripture has the answer for that question.

On the night before he was crucified on the cross, Jesus had a long talk with his disciples, and he passed along to them many truths. He said to them, "All these things

I've spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and your joy may be full." So what things had Jesus just spoken to them?

Well, first, he had told them to abide in his love. He's talking about a relationship, living in a personal relationship with him, trusting in him, believing that he knows you and loves you, and he's there to intercede for you with the Father. When you pray, it's letting him speak to you of his love and power through the working of the Holy Spirit. As you read and study Holy Scripture and come to the Lord's Supper.

There are many people who spend their entire lives missing out on having a relationship like that with him. They sit in worship services, and they know the creeds and the hymns, but they don't have a personal relationship with Christ for a variety of reasons. They've kept Jesus at arm's length on the periphery of their existence. They've got some religion, but not a relationship. They are missing the joy of abiding in his love.

I hope that's not you, but if it is, let me assure you, from my own personal experience, he can be trusted to be your savior and friend. When you surrender yourself to his care and live and remain in his love, you will experience real joy.

The other thing Jesus had told his disciples, and he's telling us today, is we are to live life on his terms, to be obedient to his commands, like loving God with all you've got and loving neighbor as self and loving one another as he's loved you. Joy is found and experienced in obedience to him who first loved us. When you give him charge over every area of your life, you will receive joy, for he knows what makes life work best.

So that's John's testimony to us today. The Lord of Joy has arrived into a joyless world that needs God's help. Believe him. Trust in him. Follow him. It's a good reminder for those of us who believe in Jesus to rejoice in and give thanks for. As I said, it's easy to lose sight of that truth or to forget it in all of the chaos and troubles around us in this world.

May this reminder renew your faith and joy right now. If you have not received Jesus yet into your life or you've been kind of keeping him at arm's length for some reason or another, it's not too late for you. Joy is still available and offered to you. He loves you.

He didn't come to wreck your life. He came to give you life. He's worthy of your trust, for he gave up his own life at the cross for your sake and mine. Out of love for us. And he rose again so that you and I might be saved from sin and death and have what the Bible calls the joy of God's salvation.

Don't miss out on this joy and trust your life to his care and his leadership today. Submit to him and ask him to take over your whole life. Tell him you want to have a close, personal relationship with him, and I guarantee you'll be glad you did.

So, my dear friends, joy to the world. The Lord has come. Amen. Let's pray.

Oh, holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in. Be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels, their great glad tidings tell. Oh, come to us. Abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel, our Lord of joy. Amen.