# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

 **“Joy”**

**Luke 1:57-80**

**December 23, 2018**

Today we conclude our Advent series from the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel by returning to the story of the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. Earlier in the chapter we read that the priest Zechariah was serving in the Temple when an angle of God appeared to him and announced that his wife would give birth to a son, and they were to name him John. Zechariah asked, “How can this be?” Elizabeth had never been able to have children, and they were both old. The King James Version of the Bible says rather graphically of Elizabeth that she was “well stricken in years.” Not a prime candidate for pregnancy! When Zechariah questioned the promise of God, the angle told him that because of his unbelief he would be unable to speak until the child was born.

For nine long months, Zechariah has only been able to communicate by scribbling notes and gesturing with his hands. It’s hard to imagine what that must have been like for him, unable to share the news that he was going to be a father. But now, the nine months have come to an end and Elizabeth is finally ready to give birth to their son. I invite you to turn with me to Luke 1:57-66 as we pick up the story

When it was time for Elizabeth’s baby to be born, she gave birth to a son. And when her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had been very merciful to her, everyone rejoiced with her. When the baby was eight days old, they all came for the circumcision ceremony. They wanted to name him Zechariah, after his father. But Elizabeth said, “No! His name is John!” “What?” they exclaimed. “There is no one in all your family by that name.” So they used gestures to ask the baby’s father what he wanted to name him. He motioned for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s surprise he wrote, “His name is John.” Instantly Zechariah could speak again, and he began praising God. Awe fell upon the whole neighborhood, and the news of what had happened spread throughout the Judean hills. Everyone who heard about it reflected on these events and asked, “What will this child turn out to be?” For the hand of the Lord was surely upon him in a special way.

There is great joy among their friends and relatives that God has been merciful to Zechariah and Elizabeth, and has given them a son. Now, when the baby is eight days old, it’s time for the circumcision and naming of the child, an event directed by the two-thousand-year practice of the Jews, first begun when God gave Abraham the command to circumcise the males in his family as a sign of their covenant with God. Though not required by God, it had become custom that the child receive a family name, honoring one of his relatives. It seems like the crowd favorite was something like “Zechariah, Junior,” a name that would bring honor to his father.

We can imagine the scene. The baby has just been circumcised, something he’s not too happy about, and over his cries the people shout, “What is his name?” while others are turning to each other and saying, “I think they should name him after his father.” Everyone is happy to voice their opinion about what to name the child, and in the midst of all the noise Elizabeth speaks up and says, “His name is John.” “John? Really, John? John who? There’s no ‘John’ in your family.” Thinking that Elizabeth may be trying to pull a fast one on her poor speechless husband, they turn to Zechariah and ask him what he wants his son’s name to be.

His long silence has allowed Zechariah to reflect on what God’s will is for him and for his son. For nine months Zechariah has been growing in his faith. His reliance on a God who will do exactly what he has promised has been maturing, and he is now prepared to do what God has asked of him. He picks up a tablet and writes: “His name is John.” Immediately he can speak again.

I wonder what you or I would want to say first if for nine months we had been unable to speak. I think we would be tempted to want to tell people what it was like for us, about the hardships along the way and the ways we were able to overcome them. Not Zechariah. The first thing he does is give praise to God. If these hymns had been composed, perhaps he would have sung out, “Then sings my soul, my savior God to thee. How great thou art. How great thou art” and “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God almighty. Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee.” When the joy of the Lord is in our hearts we can’t help but give him praise.

In verse sixty-six, we are told that everyone who heard about what had taken place, about Zechariah being able to speak again and the unusual name given his son, wondered what this child would turn out to be. Zechariah knew. He knew because God had given him the opportunity to meditate, to ask questions of God in prayer, to read the prophecies in Scripture that speak of the coming Messiah and the one who will prepare the way for him. This child was not only for him and his dear wife, Elizabeth, to bring them pleasure in their old age. He was given to them, but he was meant for the world that through him we might better understand and follow the one of whom he speaks.

The joy of the crowd is real, but it’s a joy based on limited understanding. They understand a child is born, but they don’t understand the meaning of his birth. They haven’t been given Zechariah’s nine months to consider that this is about much more than simply welcoming a child into the world. It’s about God fulfilling ancient promises to his people. It’s about salvation. In contrast to the crowd’s limited joy is Zechariah’s comprehensive joy expressed in verses 67-79

Then his father, Zechariah, was filled with the Holy Spirit and gave this prophecy: “Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people. He has sent us a mighty Savior from the royal line of his servant David, just as he promised through his holy prophets long ago. Now we will be saved from our enemies and from all who hate us. He has been merciful to our ancestors by remembering his sacred covenant—the covenant he swore with an oath to our ancestor Abraham. We have been rescued from our enemies so we can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness for as long as we live. “And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord. You will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins. Because of God’s tender mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace.”

You and I will participate in many traditions, customs and expectations in the next couple of days related to the celebration of the birth of Jesus, and they bring us joy. But it will be a limited joy if it is not undergirded by an understanding of the meaning of his birth. It will be a short-lived joy, fading out as the reality of going back to work, and having friends and relatives return to their homes, and taking up again our everyday routines, begins to set in. The deeper joy of Christmas is found in knowing *why* Jesus was born, not just simply celebrating *that* he was born.

“Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her King.” If Jesus is the Lord of your life, if he is the King of your world, then you know the true meaning of his birth and then, as he said to his disciples, his joy will be in you and your joy will be full.