# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

 **“Joy”**

**Luke 1:57-80**

 **December 18, 2022**

This morning 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 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 she was now quite old. 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.

Lauri and I were in our first year of marriage when Lauri went to see her doctor. She hadn’t been feeling well and we assumed it was the flu. I was still in college, she was just getting started in her career, and we had taken precautions not to get pregnant. We had our master plan for when our first child would be born. I still remember when she came home from the doctor and told me she was pregnant. I myself was stricken dumb for a moment or two, but I can’t imagine what it was like for Zachariah not to be able to speak for nine months. I couldn’t wait to tell everyone that I was going to be a dad!

The nine months are up and Elizabeth is finally ready to give birth to her son. I invite you to turn with me to Luke 1:57-66 where 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 at the birth of John, not only for his parents but also among their neighbors and relatives. He is now eight days old, and it’s time for his circumcision and naming. It was the custom that a first-born son receive a family name, honoring one of his relatives. The neighbors and relatives favored something like “Zechariah Junior,” a name that would bring honor to his father.

We can imagine the scene. The child has just been circumcised, which he’s probably not too happy about, and over his cries the people shout, “What is his name?” Traditionally it was the father who announced his son’s name, but since Zechariah can’t speak, they direct their question to Elizabeth. “His name is John,” she replies. Unhappy with that choice of a name, they appeal to Zechariah. He takes a tablet and writes, “His name is John.” As emphatically as his wife, Zechariah affirms the name given them by the angel. Instantly he can speak again and he begins to praise 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” or “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.

Luke tells us that everyone who heard about what had taken place wondered what this child would turn out to be. Zechariah knew. He knew because God had given him the opportunity to meditate on the words of the angel, and to read the prophecies in Scripture that speak of the coming Messiah and the one who will prepare the way for him. This child is not only for him and his dear wife to bring them joy 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 people present that day was real, but it was a joy based on limited understanding. They understand a child is born, but they don’t comprehend 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 people’s sentimental joy is Zechariah’s comprehensive joy expressed in verses 67-80

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.” John grew up and became strong in spirit. And he lived in the wilderness until he began his public ministry to Israel.

You and I will participate in various holiday traditions and celebrations in the coming week, and they bring us joy. But it will be a limited joy if it is not undergirded by an understanding of the meaning of Jesus’ birth. It will be a short-lived joy, fading away as the reality of going back to the routines of our lives sets in, unless our routine contains the deeper joy of Christmas which is found in knowing that God has sent us a mighty Savior. “Joy to the world, the Lord is come . . . Let every heart prepare him room.”