*DEVOTIONAL*

December 17 - 22

*Joy*

**Monday, December 17 Luke 1:57-66**

*“His name is John”*

 When God acts, we should listen. Zechariah has learned this lesson. When the birth of John was announced to him by the angel Gabriel, he could not believe it, so the Lord gave him a sign for reflection. He would be unable to speak until all was fulfilled. This passage shows the outcome of Zechariah’s reflection. As a righteous man, he has learned from his mistake. Through the pain of his discipline, he emerges a stronger man of God.

 In the midst of great joy, the time has come for the circumcision and naming of the child. Tradition dictated that the child should receive a family name, but Elizabeth gives her son the name “John.” Convinced an error has been made, the relatives and friends ask the father through sign language. Apparently Zechariah can neither hear nor speak. On a tablet Zechariah writes the name the angel had given him for the child: “John.” Immediately his tongue is freed, and he speaks in praise to God. The long silence has allowed him to reflect on God’s purposes for his son, and he is now prepared to follow them.

*May I always be ready to hear you, Lord, and to obey your voice. Amen.*

**Tuesday, December 18 Matthew 17:1-8**

*“This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy”*

 Those with the privilege of close proximity to Jesus were often screened from fully comprehending his identity and mission by their own preconceptions of what the Messiah was to be, which hindered them from seeing who Jesus actually was. Jesus was the man with whom they had walked and talked and shared meals. They believed him to be God’s Messiah, the divinely endowed deliverer of Israel. But it took the transfiguration to drive home that he was not just divinely endowed but was actually himself divine.

 The voice of God the Father from the cloud gives his public endorsement of Jesus, identifying him as the embodied Son of God, and it gives him great joy to do so. Jesus is the ultimate Prophet who fulfills Moses’ and Elijah’s prophetic expectations as recorded in the Old Testament, and the disciples must listen to him to understand his messianic mission. The gloriously transfigured Jesus Messiah will be the divine sacrifice on the cross, but he will be raised from the dead to live forever as their messianic deliverer.

*It brings me great joy, Jesus, to proclaim you to be the Son of God. Amen.*

**Wednesday, December 19 Hebrews 12:1-3**

*“Let us run with endurance”*

 The writer of Hebrews uses an athletic metaphor, presenting a forceful challenge for Christians to endure in a “marathon” commitment to Christ. In order to effectively run a marathon, a person needs to get rid of burdensome clothing and lose excess body fat. Similarly, the Christ-follower must lay aside everything that hinders if the faith race is to be run well. More specifically, we are to get rid of the entangling sin which clings so closely to us that it impedes our progress in the faith.

 In order to run this marathon according to the course that God has marked out for us, we fix our eyes on Jesus as the One who has completed the race and helps us to do the same. Jesus looked beyond immediate, painful circumstances to the reward that was ahead. He treated the hardships of life, even the cross, as something of little concern compared to the joy of living his life according to the will of his heavenly Father. When we struggle to keep going in our faith journey, we can draw strength from him.

*May your joy be in me, Lord, as I run the race you have laid out for me. Amen.*

*DEVOTIONAL*

December 17 - 22

*Joy*

**Thursday, December 20 Luke 1:67-75**

*“Praise be to the Lord”*

 With his lips free to speak, Zechariah praises God for what he is doing. Whereas Mary’s hymn spoke in personal and general terms, this hymn of praise anticipates and overviews the careers of the two children whom divine destiny has brought together. Though John is the child born, Zechariah’s hymn focuses on the person to whom John will point – the One promised long ago who would be sent to rescue and bless those who turn to him. Like Mary’s hymn, this thanksgiving psalm is filled with Old Testament imagery and declares how the strong One from the house of David will be a light of rescue and guidance for his people.

 The hymn’s main theme appears in verses 68-70. The Lord God of Israel has once again acted on behalf of his people by visiting them and redeeming them. God has raised up a mighty savior through whom God’s visit comes and redemption is offered. The subsequent rescue from her enemies will allow Israel to serve God with her whole life, without fear, and in righteousness and holiness.

*I praise you, Lord, for you have redeemed me and I can now serve you. Amen.*

**Friday, December 21 Luke 1:76-80**

*“You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High”*

 Zechariah indicates that his own son will be a prophet of the Most High God, preparing a people for the coming visit of the Lord by telling them about salvation through the forgiveness of sins. Of course, the way of God is inseparably linked to what he will do through his Messiah. The message about salvation and the forgiveness of sins, which John preaches, will be like the commission Jesus gives to his disciples at the end of the Gospel, except that at that later time events such as the cross and the resurrection will have filled in details that are only vague here.

 The One John will point to as the bright morning light is the Son who comes from heaven and shines on those in darkness and death, guiding them onto the path of peace with God. Importantly, Zechariah puts himself among those in darkness. As a spiritual man, he knows that the only way to walk righteously is to follow the path God lays out before him. Zechariah knows that the Messiah is coming. He will be powerful; but more than that, he will be light shining in the darkness.

*Confessing the dark places in my life, Father, I live in the light of your Son. Amen.*

**Saturday, December 22 John 16:19-24**

*“Your grief will turn to joy”*

When Jesus speaks of a “little while” and the disciples will not see him, and a “little while” and they will see him, there is a confused wondering among them. What does he mean by this “little while”? Jesus is not speaking of linear time, the measurement of hours or days or weeks, but of time that is heavy with importance. Jesus uses the example of a pregnant woman whose “little while” is the time from her birth pangs to the birth itself, and compares it to his “leaving” when he will die and his “returning” when he will be raised from the dead.

 The “birth pangs” of separation due to his death will “give birth” to the joy of his coming on Easter morning. How beautifully Jesus likens his own journey through death to life to the pain and joy of childbirth. Again he has reached deep into the imagery of the Old Testament prophets and uses a picture with which his people were familiar. For the joy of the coming Messiah and the promise of resurrection are like the birth of a child (Isaiah 26:17-21; 66:7-8, 13-14; Jeremiah 22:23; Hosea 13:13-15).

*There is pain in this world, Lord, but your joy is with me every day. Amen.*