

Finding joy

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 December 2022

Preacher: Chris Lowe

[0 : 00] Okay, thank you for reading. With that passage open in front of us, I want to speak this morning about joy.! I'd like to ask, where can Lydia and you and I find real, actual joy?

For some people, December is a month that we look forward to. The nights close in, you might love the twinkly lights, the presents, the decorations, the old films on TV, and Christmas makes you feel warm and glowy.

Others of us feel less warm about the season. You're too busy, there's too much fake happiness on TV, there's too much pressure to buy gifts you can't afford, there's wretched Christmas carols on repeat again and again, not much gladness at all in you.

For some of us, we may feel life is going okay at the moment. Maybe you're energetic and healthy and free. For others today, the strains of life will weigh on us. Maybe a combination of nagging tiredness, dark evenings, pressure at work, no let up at home, family tensions, a massive to-do list. For some this season, choices to make between heating and eating, and it feels like life is pressing down on you. And for some people, on top of that, there will be something particular or long-term which burdens us.

[1 : 32] Disappointment over how life is going, an illness or a mood you can't shake, a sense of having failed, or guilt over something we've done, or grief for someone we've lost.

What I want to ask this morning is, in the midst of real life, and in the lead-up to Christmas, where can you and I find, where can we experience joy?

I ask that because genuine, real joy is what we find here, in Luke chapter 1. This is Luke 1. It's the eyewitness-based, carefully investigated account of the lead-up to the birth of Jesus.

And what we've just read, it's not sparkly story with smiley cartoon characters. This is first-century Israel, with flesh-and-blood people, like us.

Those whom, it will say later in chapter 1, live in darkness and the shadow of death. And yet, in Luke 1, in these famous verses, stirring in the darkness, there is a mood of growing gladness.

[2 : 45] In the bit just before, the angel came to Zechariah, in chapter 1, verse 13, and said, Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer's been heard.

Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son. You're to call him John. And he'll be a joy and delight to you. And many will rejoice because of his birth. And further on, in chapter 2, verse 10, Jesus has been born, and an angel of the Lord appears to shepherds in the fields, saying, Don't be afraid, I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

And in our verses this morning, you're meant to feel the mood, I think, as these two pregnant women, Mary and Elizabeth, get together. In verse 41, as Mary walks into her friend's house, Elizabeth's baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

She shouts out, verse 42, blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you'll bear.

Verse 44, as soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

He couldn't stop himself. And Mary is so glad that in verse 46, she bursts into singing. It's not a dirge, this song.

[4 : 04] I grew up in a church where every Sunday evening we sang these words to a chant. Sometimes they can be good, but the chants we sang were quite lifeless. My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit of rejoice, thank God my saviour.

That kind of thing. It's not like that, these words here. The Magnificat is Katrina and the waves walking on sunshine. It's S Club 7, Reach for the Stars. It's the Alleluia Chorus.

You're meant to imagine that. My soul glorifies the Lord, she sings, and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour. What I'm saying is, through these events here, not just for Elizabeth and Mary, but rippling

out to all people, living in the shadow of death comes genuine, heartfelt joy bubbling up. Not a short-term happy hour. Not a plastic fixed grin, trying to pretend life's nice and easy. But in the middle of life's darkness, a foundational, life-changing gladness that lasts for good. We want some of that. Where do we find it, this joy? Well, you've got to zero in on Mary's song in verse 46 onwards.

[5 : 21] Because although Mary is unique, she's the mother of Jesus, the thing that captures her and makes her sing is for us too.

And so notice, right at the start, verses 46 and 47, my soul glorifies the Lord. And my spirit rejoices in God my saviour.

Mary's joy is not linked to her possessions, her energy levels, how close the holidays are, or her health. Her joy is tied to the living God.

She rejoices in God my saviour. And the Christian claim, the Bible's claim all the way through, the reason it's so good to baptise Lydia this morning, is that for us human beings, we who live in the shadow of death, long-term joy can be found in nothing else, and no one else, but in him.

The living God. God the saviour. The one for whom we are made. And whether this morning you believe in God, or you think he's a figment of imagination, might we together listen just a touch now to Mary's song and see what it is that moves her so deeply.

[6 : 39] Two things I want to show us here. Two things to notice from her song, For Us. The key to lasting joy. Firstly, sings Mary, God my saviour is mighty.

He is overwhelmingly, unstopably mighty. And she loves that about him. She loves it. My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour.

Why? For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on, all generations will call me blessed, for the mighty one has done great things for me.

Holy is his name. Says Mary, he is the mighty one. He's powerful and holy and able to do as he pleases.

And there is none like him. And he's done great things, says Mary, for me, personally. And further back in Luke 1, God had promised Mary would conceive and give birth to a son.

[7 : 46] And Mary says, understandably, verse 34, how will this be, since I am a virgin? And the angel answered, the Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

See, Mary's not playing at, I'd like to believe there's a powerful God here. She's an unmarried virgin. And overshadowed by God's power, her empty womb has blossomed into new life.

A miracle of God's life-bringing might. This God, who has done uniquely great things for Mary, as he did for Elizabeth, the barren, childless pensioner.

Because no word from God will ever fail. Mary's growing belly testifies to her. That she lives in a world ruled over by the Mighty One.

But he's not just mighty towards Mary. Because having sung of her personal experience, in verse 50 onwards, her song expands and widens as she sings more broadly about the character and the works of God.

[8 : 59] And that is because as Jesus the Saviour is born, God is acting in line with his character in mighty power. To change the world. That's what verse 51 onwards is about.

He's performed mighty deeds with his arms. Language that echoes the Exodus hundreds of years beforehand, when God, in history, saved his people Israel out of Egypt with an outstretched arm and mighty acts of judgment.

He sent plagues, took his people, parted the sea, brought them through and scattered his enemies. And Mary is saying that as Jesus is conceived and born, God is acting again, ultimately, to rescue people who are trapped in their sins and living in the shadow of death.

Verse 51 on is so very strong. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. Fast forward into the adult life of Jesus, and that is exactly what happens.

[10 : 22] The proud and the rich who oppress the poor and stand against God, Jesus takes them down. And the humble who cry out for forgiveness and mercy from God are lifted high by him.

And Jesus himself will die in humility on a cross, weighed down with the sins of the world and defeated, so it appears. But death won't hold him, because God in his mighty power lifted up this

humble one and raised him from the dead and exalted him to the highest place.
And we sang a kid's action song earlier, which a few joined in with the actions. My God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there's nothing that he cannot do.

That's a kid's song. But it is exactly what Mary's singing about here. As through Jesus Christ, God acts in power to defeat his enemies and save people from sin and death.

A God of power, whose power flows irresistibly down through history and to the ends of the earth today.

[11 : 32] Every Christian believer can testify to this. 29 years ago, I was walking one way away from the living God. And he reached down into my life and showed me the truth and beauty of Jesus.

He lifted me up and forgave my 18-year-old mess of self-centred wrongs. And he put his Holy Spirit in me and gave me new power to follow him.

As he has for millions around the world. And today, in 2022, the reigning Lord Jesus Christ is building his worldwide church. And no society and no dictator and no law can stop him.

And on the final day of judgment, in line with his character, the Most High God will scatter all who wave a fist at Jesus Christ. He'll bring them down and send them away. And those like Mary who trust in him, he will fill and lift up and resurrect and save forever.

Because God, the Saviour, is mighty, Mary sings. I don't know whether that connects with us this morning.

[12 : 45] Or sounds bonkers. I do want to say, knowing that we live in a world ruled over by God Almighty is very, very good.

It is so good. Because imagine what life would be like in our dark and death-shadowed world if God, if he is there, was some kind of passive, pasty, faraway being.

Who didn't want to get involved with us down here. Or who wasn't able to act. If there is no mighty God, if we're just left to stew in our mess, floundering around trying to make the best of life, overwhelmed till we die.

Could you imagine that? Be desperate. Be hopeless. Be miserable. But that is not reality.

We have a good, powerful, salvation-bringing God who rules over us. In Israel's past, for Mary personally, and through Jesus, for our world, and for Lydia and us today.

[13 : 53] No one can match him. Nothing can stop him. God, my Saviour. Grasp hold of that and you think, no wonder Mary is rejoicing. No wonder. As she considers the one in her belly.

But it's not just his might. And lastly this morning, there's a second strand running through this song. Which is that God, my Saviour, is merciful.

At the same time as being ferociously, unstopably mighty. He's a merciful God. He's tender and kind and compassionate towards people in need.

And that's what Mary herself experiences. And she loves that about God too. His mercy. Just come back to verse 47.

My spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour. For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. It's easy to forget this if you believe in the Blessed Virgin Mary.

[15 : 00] Mary was a humble girl. A near the bottom of the pile girl. No status. From a little backwater. She was a nothing person. And the Lord of heaven and earth looks upon her.

And in his love, he stoops down and says, I want you, Mary. I want you to bear the Son of God. And you think how that was for her.

What kindness. As God lifts up Mary and uses her in his service. Such that, verse 48, from now on all generations will call me blessed.

Ask, why did God choose her to bear Jesus? Why did he not choose a woman of noble birth and standing? And I think the answer is because that is what God is like.

He delights to come to the poor and the humble. To the fatherless and the widow. To the downtrodden and the nobodies. He loves to come to those in need.

[16 : 06] Who see him and cry out to him for mercy. And he loves to shower grace on them. Again, it's not just with Mary this. Look, verse 50 onwards, his mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation.

Which is exactly what Mary's song is talking about. As he has compassion on those in need. He's lifted up the humble. He's filled the hungry with good things.

Verse 54, he's helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever as he promised. That is, we have a helping and a merciful saviour. And again, you see that so perfectly in the adult life of Jesus. He reaches out to touch a leper and cleanses him.

He sits down and eats with sinners and prostitutes. He raises to life the only son of a widow. Tells the story, Luke 15, of a father bursting with love for his lost and dirty prodigal son.

[17:13] The son of man came to seek and save the lost, Jesus will say. And God our saviour shows the ultimate in tender-hearted mercy by sending this dearly loved son from the womb of Mary to the cross of Calvary.

To shoulder our sins and our shame. So that today, to the low and humble, to the dirty and shamed. To people with nothing to offer to God except to cry for help.

He grants free forgiveness and acceptance and life. And today, through the church, a bunch of nobodies. He now builds supernatural communities.

Who are mindful of the humble. Where no one need be hungry anymore. This is what the true God is like. This is what he's like.

Did you know this? As with Mary, so with his world today. He stoops down to the nobodies and has mercy on us.

[18:18] I want to say, I just wonder if some of us might need to hear that, particularly this morning. Could be as you're in church this morning, you know the sense, if I can put it like this, of being a nothing person.

In some way overlooked in life. Or left on one side. Maybe you feel sometimes that you are damaged goods and that you are no good to anyone.

Maybe secretly a gnawing sense of how unclean you are before God. How lost you feel. Even how guilty you are. And what would he honestly want to do with someone like you?

Would you see this morning what the Lord God really is like? To the lowly. To the guilty.

To the nobodies who come to him. He is full of mercy. He is able to reach down to you personally in Jesus Christ and lift you up.

[19:27] Like washing you with water in baptism. He can cleanse you. And forgive you. And love even you. And hold you and fit you for his service.

He can be your saviour. He really can. And we're talking a bit this morning about joy.

Just very straightforwardly. In the midst of real life. That's what we're talking about. In the midst of life with all its strain and wear and darkness.

In this lead up to Christmas. Where can we find real deep joy? And in Luke chapter 1. Mary sings this so famous song about God. This faithful unchanging God.

Who rules over our world today. If you stand against him proudly in your life. I don't need him. He will scatter you and bring you down. And there will be no joy in that.

[20:30] But when instead a person. When instead you come humbly. And accept him as your personal saviour. The one who sends his son into the world. My saviour.

You discover like Mary. A God of glorious might. And tender mercy. I'd want to say to Lydia this morning. If she was here. Now. This is the God to whom you now belong.

Mightily. And full of mercy. As with Mary. He comes into Lydia's life. And is unchangeably for her. Powerful and wonderfully kind to her.

And to all who put their trust in him. And the wonderful thing is that having begun a good work in us. We who turn to him. Our God promises that he will keep us.

In his strong and tender hands. And he will keep us through this veil of tears. Until the day when finally the proud are brought down. And the humble are lifted up and resurrected to eternal life.

[21:32] And we see him face to face. And are filled with good things forever. Forever. That's Mary's song. It is S Club 7.

It is the Alleluia chorus. In Jesus Christ God our Saviour is mighty. And merciful. And here's the last thing. The more that Lydia and you and I give ourselves freely into his service.

The more we forget ourselves this December. And fix our eyes on him. The more we drink in his power and goodness. The more we live to glorify our Lord.

What will we find growing within us? What will we find within us right now. In the midst of trouble and pressure and tiredness and tears.

As we live to serve this Saviour. What will come up within us? The answer is joy. Joy. A foundational.

[22 : 30] Deep. Forever. Unshakeable. Joy. Because I know him and he knows me. And he has me in his grip. My soul glorifies the Lord.

She sings. And my spirit rejoices. In God my Saviour. Let me lead us in a prayer.

Let's pray together. Almighty God and Father.

We praise and thank you this morning. For your character. Father. You have shown yourself. In history. As a God of overwhelming might.

And tender mercy. We need you. Our God. To be the mighty and merciful one you are. Please make us.

[23 : 31] Those who like Mary. Sit humbly before you. Accept the mercy you offer. And place ourselves in your mighty hands.

And we trust that you will. Help us. And fill us. And keep us. And grant Lydia and us joy. As we serve you. Our Lord and Saviour.

We ask. In Jesus name. Amen.