

Jesu, Joy of Man's Desire

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 0 0] I want to express again on behalf of everyone here our thanks to the choir, to the orchestra and to Terry for their gift to us this morning.

And to Jane Corral, who is a member of the youth group, who is singing in English and German. Is that right? Yes. And tenor and soprano. Is that right? I understand the youth group is calling this the Jane Tata.

Well, whatever you call it, the purpose of this cantata is to teach us how to have joy. This is one of the happiest of Bach's cantatas and the well-known chorale at the end, Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring, weaves together our longing and our hope and the joy from Christ and binds us to him.

It's a collaborative work, as you know. So, the words were written by a fellow called Frank and Bach and he worked together on all the cantatas written during this time at Weimar.

But this is probably the most joyful. And when Bach moved to Leipzig, the happiness and exuberance of this cantata got him into trouble.

[1 : 1 3] It was written for the weeks before Christmas and the cathedral at Leipzig judged the cantata to be far too joyful for the serious business of preparing for Christmas.

It's a true story. And so he moved it to July. But it really does belong to this time of the year. It's an extended meditation on Luke chapter 1, which David read to us, about the birth of John the Baptist and the birth of Jesus Christ, which is announced by the angel Gabriel.

And that is why there are two voices in the cantata, the voice of Elizabeth, John the Baptist's mother, and of Mary. And the whole tone of the chapter and the cantata is one of deep and divine joy.

Very different from superficial and passing pleasure or happiness. This is about God coming and acting in what is an impossible situation.

And the whole chapter is about where this joy comes from, what it looks like in our lives, and what it means. What Luke does in his first chapter is he tells us two stories, two babies, two mothers, two visits from the angel Gabriel.

[2 : 3 4] And then they meet together. And it's as they meet together that the story comes to a climax. And baby number one leaps for joy in the womb when he meets baby number two.

Because the Bible reveals that God is a God who delights in doing good. He delights in sharing his joy with us. You know, some people pity Christians and they think we have a tough job trying to sell a kind of a defective product.

You know, come to Jesus and it will decrease your joy. Actually, the opposite is the truth. Our true joy comes when we begin to delight in God.

And the two miracles are very different from each other in the chapter. Let's look firstly then at the first appearance of the angel Gabriel. And this has to do with the birth of John the Baptist.

The story begins about a year before John the Baptist is born. And we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth who are an elderly couple. And the word that is used of them is that they are barren.

[3 : 40] They are childless. Despite living lives which are upright and godly, they face death with profound disappointment and barrenness.

Elizabeth cannot have children. And she speaks about herself in terms of shame and disgrace and reproach, which is why that word is used in the first aria.

There's no future for them. They're without child, without grandchildren, in a culture that loved children. It's a very public shame. They're daily reminded of their humiliation.

And it is now too late. Elizabeth is clearly beyond menopause. They are beyond human possibility. And I think that is the first clue to real joy.

It comes when there is no future, when there is no hope, when there is no possibility. It comes from God undoing what is humanly impossible.

[4 : 45] And into this shame and into this barrenness comes Gabriel with a word from God. Zechariah is serving as a priest in the Holy of Holies. And when the angel appears to him, Zechariah is shaken and stirred.

And the angel says to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer is heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son and you'll call his name John. You will have joy and gladness.

Many will rejoice at his birth. He'll be great before the Lord and make ready for the Lord a people prepared. See, the angel calmly states what is absolutely humanly impossible.

Elizabeth, who is now in her retirement, is going to have to arrange a baby shower. And the boy is named from heaven, John, who becomes John the Baptist because he has a particular mission from God and the mission is to bring joy and gladness.

And this word gladness is the word for leaping. We don't do much of that in this church, but it's a little... for some good reason.

[5 : 59] Then maybe we should. This is a word for jumping and dancing and it's the delight that God promises in the Old Testament when the Messiah comes.

This joy only comes from one place. It comes from heaven. It's not diminished or weakened by difficult circumstances. In fact, it comes right into the midst of the most humanly impossible situation.

And the reason that John the Baptist brings delight and gladness and leaping joy is that he comes to prepare the way for the one who is unimaginably greater, even Jesus Christ.

And we must not miss this, that ultimate joy is attached in the end to Christ. And that's why the world needs to be prepared for his coming and that's why we need to be prepared for his coming.

And all of this is too much for Zechariah. He finds it very hard to believe what the angel is saying. And so he challenges the angel and points out the very obvious thing that he is too old and his wife is too old and that what he is saying is beyond possibility.

[7 : 04] And the angel gives him this lovely answer. He says, I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of God and I was sent to speak to you and bring you this good news. It's a great answer.

Zechariah, who do you think you are talking to? In fact, you're not going to do any more talking now for nine months. That's enough, thank you. We read after this, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant.

Five months she remained in seclusion. The Lord has done this for me, she said. He has shown me his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.

It's lovely. This is the first action of God in the chapter. And what he does is he fixes what is broken. He gives an old couple the desire of their hearts, but he's doing much more than that.

He is fulfilling the promises that he has made hundreds and thousands of years before through the prophets. And the word that the angel brings of joy comes into barrenness and shame and reverses human impossibility.

[8 : 13] The second time Gabriel comes, the second word is different from the first. Elizabeth is now six months pregnant. Gabriel does not go to someone who is elderly and married.

He goes to someone who is young and not married. Again, God is about to do the impossible, but this time it's different. I want you to see the difference here.

You see, Mary is just about to get married to Joseph. She's fully expecting to have children. But this completely shocking word comes from God, not to heal her brokenness, not to fix anything, but to give her something which is immeasurably and unimaginably more than she could possibly think.

God is fulfilling his purposes. She is going to be the first woman since the creation of the world who has had a child purely by God's influence. But you see what God is doing.

He's not just fixing something wrong, but he's going above and beyond. And that is why when the angel comes to her twice, he says, Hail, O favoured one. Now, it's not really a word that we use today, is it?

[9 : 26] O favoured one. And when I was growing up in Australia, it was a horse racing term. If you had some money to bet on a horse, you would bet on the favoured one.

Horse with good legs, good track record, a mudder. If you ran in the mud, I'm exposing too much of my childhood, aren't I? This is not really what Gabriel means.

The root idea is the idea of grace. And to translate it into English would be Gabriel saying, Hail, actually literally he says, Grace, to the one on whom grace is now being poured out, which is a little bit clumsy.

Essentially, what Gabriel is saying to Mary is, Mary, you are someone who is receiving a massive and undeserved gift of kindness.

It's beyond your comprehension, Mary, not because of anything in you or because you have deserved it, but because of God's grace. And this is the source and this is the fountain of true joy.

[10 : 34] It is God's absolutely free and undeserving grace. You know, the Bible teaches that the grace of God is not motivated by anything in us, not our value and our preciousness, not our goodness, not our anything.

It's motivated by something in God himself, which is called grace or loving kindness or mercy. You see, if God's activity and if God's love depended on something in us and on our deserving it, it would not be the reason for joy.

It might be a reason for arrogance. Things are going well. I'm a good person. But it would be more likely a reason for discouragement, particularly when things go wrong.

This is the key to joy, that there's nothing, nothing in this that we deserve, but it comes from God's freedom. Mary didn't wake up in the morning and say, I'm a single person, why don't I have a baby with God's help?

His grace is absolutely unexpected and undeserved. And you see, when the angel says, you are the one receiving grace, it's not, again, it's not just to do the impossible, but it's to do the inconceivable literally.

[11 : 56] what God is doing is beyond her imagination. And what is beyond her imagination is not just the fact that she's going to have a child in this way, but who the child is.

The child that God is placing in her womb is the one on whom all our hopes depend, all our life depend, from whom joy, true joy, and delight, and blessing comes.

which means, of course, that this joy is not just for her, but it's for us as well. Behold, Gabriel says to her, you shall conceive and bear a son and you shall call his name Jesus.

He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever.

Of his kingdom there will be no end. The child will be called Holy Son of God. It's as though Gabriel is so overwhelmed with who this child is and what he's going to do that three times he says both to Mary.

[13 : 04] What is he going to do? He will receive the throne and kingdom of King David from God and he's going to reign over the house of Israel forever and of his kingdom there will never be an end.

This is what God promised thousands of years before. The problem is when we think of kingdom we think of a political unit. We think of police forces and law courts and all sorts of other things.

But the kingdom of God is a kingdom of peace of shalom. It's a kingdom of justice and righteousness in the fullest sense of that word. It's the kingdom where the lion and the lamb can lie down together and there's nothing in all God's holy mountain that will ever hurt us.

The kingdom is the place of no fear and no failure and no deception where everything evil is utterly banished where all our tears are wiped away where every one of us sit under their fig tree and under their vine leaves enjoying friendship with each other and friendship with God.

That's why Gabriel says you'll call his name Jesus. That is the name for saving us from our sins. That is why he's going to be the Son of the Most High, the Holy One because nobody but this child can do this.

[14 : 22] And if you read through Luke's Gospel as I encourage you to do, you'll see that everything Jesus does shows him moving his saving grace out to people.

When he heals the blind and the lame, when he heals all those with disease, he's demonstrating what the kingdom is like. when he feeds the 5,000, when he calms the storm, when he raises the dead, he's showing what kind of joy he brings.

When he meets people both rich and poor and he tells them and exposes them that they are lost, he says, I have come to seek and to save all those who are lost.

He is the one we have been waiting for. He is the joy of our desiring. And if what Gabriel says to Mary is true, it's not just for her but for us as well.

For he did not come to seek and save just those who are lost in that generation but in every generation. You see, it's just wildly beyond Mary's imagination and I think that's why the last words Gabriel says in this chapter are these.

[15 : 32] With God, nothing is impossible. In the original it reads, with God no word is impossible.

In other words, every word that God speaks is possible because God speaks it. It doesn't matter what our situation, what God says, he can do.

There is no person who is too lost for his saving mercy. There's nothing we've done, there's no guilt, there's no shame, there's no disgrace that's too dark for him to wash it away.

There's no heart that's too hard for him to melt. There's no suffering or difficulty too intractable for his grace, there's no barrier to his joy. And Mary simply says to Gabriel, behold, I am a handmaiden of the Lord.

Be to it according, be it to me according to your word. So here is one miracle promise and a second miracle promise and now the women come together and their meeting is described.

[16 : 41] And what's amazing about it is it's not really the meeting of two women, it's the meeting of the two babies. Let me read you the words. When Mary entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth and when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit exclaimed with a loud cry, blessed are you among women, blessed is the fruit of your womb.

Why has it been granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? She says, look, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy.

Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord. It's just one question on Elizabeth's lips.

Why am I so favored? It's a great question, isn't it? And the question comes because John the Baptist, who is inside her womb, leapt for joy.

He starts his ministry very early and he does what God has given him to do. He leaps for joy. It's just, there's so much here.

[17 : 56] It's a terrifying vulnerability. Who is the weakest person out of the four of them in that room? It is the Christ. You see this weakness throughout his life and in his death as he gives himself in our place.

This is the one on whom all the promises of God depend and both women and the baby John recognize that they're in the presence of the Son of God and they're overwhelmed with his deepest sense of joy.

They know that God doesn't owe them anything and yet this child has come to bring salvation, not some vague spiritual term out there but salvation here in their wombs as it were.

And because Jesus has come to seek and to save the lost, he is able to lift us up from our barrenness and our shame and from human impossibility and he is able to take us and do more for us than we can ask or imagine.

And when we turn to Christ and we trust him, the natural question, the permanent question, the deepest question, the most important question that we ask again and again and again is this, why am I so favoured?

[19 : 07] I think true joy you see is counterintuitive. It's not really connected to our circumstances.

I mean, you think about Elizabeth and Mary, things were very complicated for them. But you see, here is the thing, God's purposes are bigger than my happiness and bigger than my ups and downs and bigger than my circumstances and his love for me does not depend on whether I am a very good person or whether I am a very devious person.

That he is acting out of his own delight to send his king and son and I think grasping that, grasping that he does it for his joy and for our joy is the open door.

I think that's why Gabriel said that the way that John the Baptist is going to prepare the world is by turning our hearts back to God. Turning the hearts of the fathers to their children, the hearts of the disobedient to the righteousness of God to make us ready.

And I think that means turning from those paths that we have carefully constructed to pursue joy. I mean, all of us are pursuing joy. Our hearts are set on it and we construct a path and we tell ourselves this is the way of hope and this is the way of life and this is the way of joy and then we hear the word of God come to us and it says Christ Jesus is over here and the true way of joy has to do with him and if we miss that way we miss his joy and it requires a most difficult turn because the decision to turn and follow Jesus Christ is not to give up the pursuit of joy, it's to intensify the pursuit of joy.

[20 : 57] it's to accept his grace and forgiveness and to understand this is where true joy begins. It's what it means to believe the words of God and that's why the last words said are from Elizabeth to Mary.

She said, blessed is she who believed that God would fulfil his word and so it is for us this morning. Blessed is each of us who believe that God will fulfil his word.

Jesus Christ is the son of the most high who has come to seek and save the lost. He is the one whose kingdom shall last forever and in him is holy wisdom love most bright joy unending life's delight.

We turn to him we believe his word and I think these words that are just about to be sung in the chorale sum it up. Happy I who have my saviour from him never will I depart he restores my drooping spirit be I sad and sick at heart cares may vex troubles grieve me yet will Jesus never leave me him I never will forsake even though my heart should break they're great words to read they're better words to sing Amen