

“Overflowing with joy”

Luke 1:39-45

Wayne Eberly

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In many ways the Gospel of Luke is just more of the same old same old. Our little encounter between two cousins, cousins named Elizabeth and Mary, has the same plot line as so many stories we find among those whose lives fill the pages of the Old Testament. Here's the familiar plot line. A person is living their life, really just going about their business, and God intervenes in a dramatic way. The intervention is so sudden, so dramatic, so unexpected, you can almost hear them say, “I didn't see that coming!”

Sarah was a woman married to a man named Abraham and they were plodding along, moving from place to place in the land of Canaan, taking an occasional sojourn to the south in search of food. Sarah had given up all hope of having a child. On the particular day I have in mind she was around 90 years old...without child. She was puttering around in her tent when Abraham poked his head in and said, “Honey, we have company. Can you rustle up a little grub?” Sarah pulled the flour from the pantry, mixed a few ingredients together, and baked a loaf of bread. Abraham was running around giving instructions to his servants to butcher a cow and get the grill started. When Abraham got back to the visitors they asked about his wife Sarah, feverishly working inside the tent. That day, up to her elbows in flour, wiping the sweat off her brow, Sarah overheard the visitors promise that by this time next year she would have a son. The thought was so preposterous, so outside the realm of possibility, so utterly unbelievable, Sarah burst forth in laughter. When she and Abraham lay down to rest after that eventful day, I bet she leaned over and whispered in the ear of her ancient and elderly husband, “I didn't see that coming.”

A crowd half a million strong had raced out of Egypt only to find themselves trapped against the waters of the Red Sea. An army of Egyptians was bearing down on them in chariots loaded with weapons of destruction. The crowd was caught between a rock and a hard place with

nowhere to go, nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, and no one to rescue them. Ahhh...not so quick with that last one. God was with them. God was with them, and God was about to rescue them. A strong east wind came from the Lord and that wind divided the water so that it formed a wall to the left and a wall to right. Now, right before their eyes, instead of an imposing body of water there was a path of salvation stretching out before them. Half a million people, jaws dropping to the ground, whispered in awe, "I didn't see that coming."

In the desert water came from a rock. Bread came from heaven. The walls of Jericho came crashing down. So did an invincible and intimidating giant named Goliath. Fiery furnaces did not burn! Lions did not devour. The sun stood still. The shadow moved backwards. And each time, and every time, as the seemingly impossible happened, this refrain of joyous surprise rose from those who had witnessed the unexpected and unexplainable power of God... "I didn't see that coming."

So now here in the Gospel of Luke, it's just more of the same old same old. Two cousins meet and God does something marvelous and miraculous. Same old same old. Same old same old. Same old same old? I hope you and I never read a story like the story of Elizabeth and Mary and say, "Same old same old." No, it never gets old when God miraculously intervenes in human affairs. Instead of getting old, it is always a wonderful surprise. It literally knocks us off our feet. "I didn't see that coming."

Come with me today to a town in the hill country of Judah, where these two cousins meet. Come with me not expecting to hear more of the same old same old. Come with me expecting God to knock us off our feet. Or as in this story, to cause us to leap for joy. For that is what happens when these two cousins meet.

At that time...that is how the encounter between the cousins begins. At that time...what time was that time? Well, we are only in verse 39 of the Gospel of Luke, but a lot has already happened up to that time. What has happened has served to set the scene for this "leap for joy" encounter that is about to take place between these cousins, between Elizabeth and Mary. Not surprisingly, every step of the way

leading up to this encounter resounds with that wonderful phrase, “I didn’t see that coming.”

Zechariah was the husband of one of the cousins, the one named Elizabeth. Zechariah was a priest. He was older. So was his wife, Elizabeth. There is nothing wrong with being old. There is nothing wrong with being, as Luke puts it, “Very old.” But for them, it did present a challenge. They were not only very old they were also very much childless. There is nothing wrong with being childless, but in this case, it turns out this very old couple had longed to have children. So Luke begins with a very old priest who just so happens to be called into service in the temple. The way they selected the particular priest who would go into the temple to serve was by casting lots. In other words, they threw some dice. The dice hit the ground, rattled around a bit, came to rest, and however it was determined from the casting of the lots, it turned out Zechariah was the one selected. That very old priest might have looked at some of his younger colleagues and said, “I didn’t see that coming.” Just wait, Zechariah. There’s more that is coming.

Zechariah gets outfitted for his priestly duties, enters the temple, burns the incense, and all of the sudden the angel of the Lord appears. Now Zechariah can really say, “I didn’t see that coming.” As if the appearance of the angel was not enough of a surprise, the angel makes an incredible promise. “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and a delight to you, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.” Here on the Sunday when we light the candle of joy, the flame flickers for this very old priest named Zechariah. He and Elizabeth, who is also very old, and very childless, will have a son. And that son will be a joy and a delight to them. The joy will be not only for them, but for the many who will rejoice at his birth. A very old priest is called to serve in the temple where an angel appears to him and he finds out he and his wife are going to have a son, and joy will be for all. I am certain that very old priest named Zechariah was saying to himself, “I didn’t see that coming.”

Actually, we know Zechariah said that, or something like it, because he really didn’t see that coming. In fact, he couldn’t grasp that

something like this was possible. He asks the angel how this can be possible? In what is a slight rebuke, the angel says because Zechariah has trouble believing all this can really happen, he will not be able to speak until the day it all happens...until the day the promised baby boy named John is born. Even though this is a slight rebuke for Zechariah's failure to believe, it leads to one of the happiest and most joyful games of charades ever played. Zechariah comes out of the temple, but he cannot tell the waiting crowd what happened inside the temple. He cannot talk. He has been silenced until the baby is born. With the exaggerated and animated hand motions of one who has just had his world rocked with joyful good news, Zechariah's arms are flailing around trying to depict an angel and the promise of a child and his very old wife Elizabeth with a growing tummy and how his mouth has been zipped shut for the next nine months. And although Zechariah cannot say one single word to that waiting crowd, his antics convey perfectly that this very old man didn't see it coming. Not at all.

Elizabeth, the very old wife, she soon discovers this great promise. Do you think she saw it coming? Her response is not as animated as the game of charades her husband played. But her emotions run deep as she says, "The Lord has done this for me. In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people." Sometimes it is with reverent awe that the children of God say, "I didn't see that coming." Not all joy is jumping up and down. Sometimes joy slowly and sweetly seeps into our souls and causes our inmost being to swell and to surge with profound gratitude.

That's the story of Elizabeth, one of the cousins at the center of our story today. Mary, the other cousin, needs no introduction. Her encounter with the angel Gabriel has been told countless times and captured in songs and illustrated in paintings and celebrated in poems. And yet part of the Christmas joy is telling her story yet again. Knowing the background of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Luke tells us, "In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord

is with you.’ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of a greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.’ ‘How will this be,’ Mary asked the angel, ‘since I am a virgin?’” (Luke 1:26-34) My only question about this story of a young virgin seeing an angel who promises that she, a virgin, will bear a child, and not just any child but the Son of the Most High, my only question is, does anyone here doubt that Mary said to herself, “I didn’t see that coming.” Mary, like Zechariah, like her cousin Elizabeth, Mary was surprised by joy. It didn’t make any sense, but wow, wow, wow. Mary’s angelic visit concludes with her trusting words, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.” Not to be lost in that angelic announcement about her own birth is the fact that Mary learns her cousin Elizabeth...yes, that Elizabeth...the one who previously was childless, is now in her sixth month.

With that background to the story, we come again to our passage for today. “At that time”, Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. Knowing what we know about these two women, Elizabeth and Mary, can we hear their encounter not as the same old same old...this is not just God doing what God always does...friends, this is not same old same old. Even when we know what’s coming, what comes is so marvelous and so miraculous, that the feeling is always the same. “I didn’t see that coming.” Hear what happens to Elizabeth when she meets cousin Mary. “The baby leaped in her womb.” Not content to keep this leap to herself, Elizabeth tells Mary, “As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.” The Gospel of Luke begins with a very old priest and his very old wife and a very virgin young woman...and no, quite frankly they didn’t see it coming. But here, just forty verses into the Gospel of Luke, before Jesus himself is even born, everyone, not just the baby in Elizabeth’s womb, but everyone is leaping for joy. God has done what only God can do.

And because it is a miracle, because it is so marvelous, because what God does is so unbelievable, we as humans just say, whether it is in the wild antics of Zechariah playing charades, the humble reverence of Elizabeth, or the faithful trust of Mary, we simply say with joy, “I didn’t see that coming.” The joy of God, the joy of Jesus, it surprises us. And even though we know it is coming, the joy is new every Christmas.

Friends, Christmas is never the same old same old. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is never the same old same old. In my mind I imagine the whole cast of characters in Luke’s gospel, characters like Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary, characters like them and so many more, in my mind I imagine the whole cast of characters taking their place in preparation for the coming of Jesus. The leper moves to his isolated spot on the set. The blind man is placed outside a door to beg. The lame man lies on a cot. The tax collector jingles his coins and pores over his tax bills with a bored and dissatisfied look. The fishermen tend to their nets. A weeping woman filled with shame hides in the shadows, hoping to escape the looks of judgment. A prodigal son scoops the slop in the pig pens. Luke’s gospel has a mother grieving over the death of her son. This cast of characters could be described in these words, they are people with hopes and fears...the hopes and fears of all the years. Their lives are different, but they all have this in common. Seemingly out of nowhere, with no warning, completely by surprise, they will encounter this man named Jesus. They won’t see it coming. The encounter will disrupt their lives and turn everything upside down. And when it is all said and done, as the leper has been cleansed and the blind can see, as the lame can walk (and leap for joy) and the tax collector has left the chains of his tax booth and the fishermen have discarded those nets for a new career fishing for men and as tears are dried and sorrows soothed, to a person those who discover the joy of Jesus all say, “I didn’t see that coming.”

The good news is that it could happen to you. That is what this is all about. Even before John the Baptist bursts from his mother’s womb, he is leaping for joy and pointing at Jesus and affirming what the angel says. God is with us. God is with us. And with God nothing is impossible.

The fact that we don't see it coming is really a great testimony that what happens with Jesus is truly divine intervention. Today we are at the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, with characters named Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary. But what happens in the beginning is only good news because of what happens in the end. Some women go to a tomb. They go to the tomb with spices. You bring spices to anoint a dead body. Their expectation as they make their way to the tomb is that they will encounter a dead body. Same old same old, just like we read every year at Easter. The dead body they expect to encounter is Jesus. Same old same old. But when those women arrive at the tomb and hear the good news that Jesus is not here, that Jesus has risen from the dead, and as joy fills their hearts, well, I guarantee you, they didn't see that coming. And no matter how many times we tell the story, it is never the same old same old. The joy surprises us and meets us in new ways.

It's actually a very special thing when God surprises us with joy. It's kind of nice not to see it coming, to have God spring a joyous surprise on us. Right after I graduated from college I enrolled in seminary and I commuted for three years from Sacramento, California, to San Francisco. This was from 1983-1986. I spent a lot of time in my car. And in my car, I spent a lot of time listening to the radio. I love music from the 1960's. I eventually found a station near San Francisco that played what were called Oldies. The morning disc jockey was a guy named Gene Nelson, and he called himself The Emperor. He was funny, crude, and sarcastic. When people would call in to request songs you could be certain he would find some way to embarrass them. The Emperor was known for being irreverent. Driving to school one morning in December the Emperor came on. I waited What crazy, zany story would he tell today? Which public figure would he ridicule? I waited with bated breath

The Emperor started to tell a story. I bet many of you have heard the story. I have heard it many times since, but that day was the first time I heard this particular story. The first time you hear a story it catches you by surprise. You don't see it coming. Anyway, the Emperor began to read slowly and with a much different tone in his voice than he usually had. It was sort of a tender tone.

*A man was at his house one snowy winter's day. The snow turned into a blinding snowstorm. He sat down to relax before the fire for the evening. Then he heard a loud thump, something hitting against the window. And another thump. He looked outside but couldn't see. So he ventured outside.*

*In the field near his house he saw, of all the strangest things, a flock of geese! They were apparently flying to look for a warmer area down south, but had been caught in the snow storm. The storm had become too blinding and violent for the geese to fly or see their way. They were stranded on his farm, with no food or shelter, unable to do more than flutter their wings and fly in aimless circles.*

*He had compassion for them and wanted to help them. He thought to himself, "The barn would be a great place for them to stay! It's warm and safe; surely they could spend the night and wait out the storm."*

*So he opened the barn doors for them. He waited, watching them, hoping they would notice the open barn and go inside. But they didn't notice the barn or realize what it could mean for them. He moved closer toward them to get their attention, but they just moved away from him out of fear. He went into the house and came back out with some bread, broke it up, and made a bread trail to the barn. They still didn't catch on. Starting to get frustrated, he went over and tried to shoo them toward the barn. They panicked and scattered into every direction except toward the barn.*

*Nothing he did could get them to go onto the barn where there was warmth, safety and shelter. Feeling totally frustrated, he exclaimed, "Why don't they follow me? Can't they see this is the only place where they can survive the storm?"*

*How can I possibly get them into the one place to save them?" He thought for a moment and realized that they just wouldn't follow a human. He said to himself, "How can I possibly save them? The only way would be for me to become like those geese. If only I could become one of them! Then I could save them! Then they would follow me and I would lead them to safety."*

With that, the Emperor was done with the tender tone. He was back to his usual antics. But I sat behind my wheel stunned. I had just heard a parable about the birth of Christ on a radio station broadcasting all over the northern California. If I became one of them, I could save them. They would all follow me to safety. Without ever saying the actual words, Gene Nelson, the Emperor of San Francisco morning radio, had invited that whole city by the bay to come to Bethlehem and worship the newborn king. I assure you, when the Emperor finished telling that amazing story, I said to myself, “I didn’t see that coming.”

That’s the thing about Christmas joy. You never really see it coming. God is so good. It always seems to come as a surprise. Shoot, you could be a shepherd sitting out in the fields watching your flock, and out of nowhere an angel appears with good news of...wait for it...wait for it...an angel appears with good news of great joy. “A Savior has been born.” Maybe it’s no surprise to you the song we are going to sing as we bring this worship service to a close. But even if you did see it coming, don’t let that stop you from embracing the wonders of His love, for it is God, and God alone who brings joy to our world. With joyful hearts, let us stand and sing.