

Joy in uncertain times

Most of us are familiar with Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth. But here is a little bit of the back story:

1. Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age, after the angel Gabriel tells her husband, Zechariah, that this will happen.
2. Zechariah questions the angel's grasp of reality – they are both long past child-bearing age, just like Abraham and Sarah, or Hannah and Elkanah in the Old Testament.
3. Because he doubts the angel's word, Zechariah is unable to speak for the next nine months.

Here's another little detail about Zechariah and Elizabeth you might find interesting: they both come from priestly families. In fact, Elizabeth is a direct descendant of Aaron. But Gabriel tells Zechariah that the child they will have is to be a *prophet*, not a priest.

He will be "filled with the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17), and Zechariah knows what this means: the long-ago prophecy that Elijah will return to announce the Messiah is about to be fulfilled in Elizabeth's and Zechariah's son.

So, Elizabeth is about six months pregnant when Gabriel shows up again, this time to a young girl named Mary. He tells her three things:

1. *God favors you!*

2. The Lord is with you!

3. Stop being afraid!

He goes on to explain that Mary will become pregnant and give birth to the Son of God. But unlike Zechariah, Mary accepts Gabriel's message, but she does ask for some clarification – **just how will this happen, since I'm a virgin?** Gabriel tells her what to expect, and then lets her know that her relative, Elizabeth, is also pregnant, because **"Nothing is impossible with God."**

Whenever we start to notice God's amazing, transformative work, it fills us with a sense of awe – I imagine just as those shepherds were filled with awe when surrounded by angels. Joy bubbles up in our spirit and God's glories are streaming around us every day, if we're willing to look for them.

Marcia McFee writes, **"Throughout the scriptures, 'glory' often has to do with 'shining,' with light. God is light and the light surrounds us. God's presence, God's deliverance, God's strength is with us like that pillar of fire, the burning bush, and now the star and ...the angels."**

But that awe-inspiring recognition of God at work can also strike fear in our hearts.

1. The shepherds felt it.
2. So did Mary.

Let stop and think about this for a moment.

1. Here we have a young, unmarried girl, who would have held no status, no power at all in her community.
2. She would have gone completely unnoticed by everyone except her immediate family.

Some considerations about yourself:

1. Have you ever felt like the rest of the world ignores you completely?
2. Have you ever felt like your value and worth are in question?
3. Have you found it difficult to hang onto the Joy and peace in your heart?
4. Have you been frustrated by the way your cries for help go unanswered?

That was Mary's normal existence. And in the midst of her powerless life, an angel of the Lord shows up and says:

1. **God has noticed you.**
2. **God values you.**
3. **The all-powerful one who created the entire universe is right here with you.**

That kind of news can be pretty scary when you think about it.

God was doing a new thing, and Mary must have wondered how she had been chosen to be a part of it.

1. No one had ever given birth to the Son of God before.
2. What's the protocol for virgin birth?
3. How does an infinite God become a finite human?

And Gabriel reminds her that, **"Nothing is impossible with God."**

1. We don't always need to know the details.
2. God calls us to trust him completely, just as Mary did.

"Let this thing you have told me about, happen to me," she said to the angel.

When Mary heads out for Judea as a single, pregnant teenager on her own – that's when it would seem reasonable for her to be afraid. But any fear she may have held when she first encountered Gabriel - is now gone. She is filled with joy. And she realizes that the only other person on earth who might have a clue about what she has just experienced is her cousin, Elizabeth.

Sometimes a woman needs another woman just to share her experience and understand exactly what she is going through.

So it probably shouldn't surprise us that Elizabeth greets Mary with a cry of joy. And even John, still a foetus Elizabeth's womb, gives her a swift kick in the ribs – a kick of delight!

That's what joy does –

1. we can't sit still.
2. We can't be casual observers.
3. We want to get in on the action.
4. We want to get up and dance.
5. We need to move when joy starts bubbling over in our hearts.
6. Fear might make us cringe and hide, but joy opens our arms wide and raises our voices.

Mary would soon sing a song about the things that Jesus would go on to do.

1. He would feed the hungry and send the rich away empty.
2. He would give power to the poor and bring down the powerful leaders of his time.
3. Mary's words would echo Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, more than thirty years later. **"Father, ... not my will but yours be done"**. In other words, **"Let it be to me according to your word."**

Jesus would do impossible things, and then he would die on a cross – a horrible death, full of shame – as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. All because Mary surrendered her fear and said, **"let this thing you have told**

me about - happen to me.” And the instant she did that, her fear was transformed into joy.

Sometimes we get caught up in the fear story. It is compelling. We're afraid of being inconsequential, of having our efforts make so little difference in this world. And frankly, we're afraid of dying. So we convince ourselves that the only way to stay safe is to build a wall between us, and whatever frightens us. Protect "our own."

But living in fear only increases Satan's power over us.

1. The hope that Jesus gives tears down any walls we might build.
2. The joy that Jesus brings bubbles over those walls, and destroys Satan's power.

Marianne Williamson writes:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God.

Your playing small does not serve the world.

There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine,

we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear,

Our presence automatically liberates others.

So here are some questions:

1. How is God showing his favor to you?
2. What do you need to stop being afraid of?
3. What miracle is God ready to work in you, that seems impossible?
4. Are you willing, like Mary was, to let God do anything with your life that he wants to?
5. Can you let God take control of you, and be with you, even when things are really confusing and scary?

Because that's exactly what God wants from you.

1. He wants to be with you and do great things in your life, just like he did in Mary's life.
2. And he wants this for you, because he loves you very much.
3. You have found favor with God.

4. You may not see an angel standing next to you, but the message God has for you today is the same one he had for Mary.

So whatever fear may be gripping your life - You can stop being afraid! because God loves you so very much, that he sent his own Son, so that if you believe in him, you will have life forever.

As you hear these words:

1. Go ahead and let your heart sing a little louder.
2. Go ahead and move your feet, maybe even into something resembling a dance
3. Go ahead and let your joy spill out around you.

Because I guarantee you,

1. someone you meet this week will need some of your joy.
2. Someone you meet this week will be at the end of hope's rope.
3. Someone will have let fear take over,
4. and someone will desperately need to know that God *is* here with us, loving us, eager to fill us with real joy.