

First Presbyterian Church
Luke 1:24-45, “We Find Joy in Connection”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 12/10/2023

This year’s Advent series began last week with the question,
“How does a weary world rejoice?”

Today we answer that question with the response,
“We find joy in connection.”

Way back in 1998, I had a roommate in Bible College
named Dan Thomas. He had a pretty unique look, he was a pretty
muscular guy with a big laugh and a prominent, remarkable nose.
Now dorm rooms are ... not large, so it’s a bonding experience to occupy
that kind of space with anyone.

In addition to late night excursions and cramming for tests,
that year of rooming together was a really important time
of spiritual formation for us.

Every morning Dan and I would wake up at 6:30AM, make tea,
and read the Bible aloud to each other, then take time to pray silently.

Dan would knit toques while sipping on Earl Grey,
and it was just a really unique, peaceful routine.

During this season of life, I learned my mom was sick with cancer.

I believe God used that time of connecting with Dan to build in extra
spiritual resources for the challenges I would soon face.

So a few years ago I went to a pastor’s gathering out at Mt. Angel Abbey,
and I see this guy come into the room and instantly *Dan Thomas*
comes into my mind.

To be honest, what I recognized was mostly this guy’s *nose*.

It was embarrassing, but I couldn’t stop looking at it.

I was like “... *that’s not quite Dan ... but that’s Dan’s NOSE.*”

So I walked over to him and introduced myself, he said his name was Ben.

I said, “Do you by any chance know Dan Thomas?”

And his face lights up with surprise and he says,

“Uh, yeah... Dan’s my brother.”

It was like a little fireworks display went off inside me.

I couldn’t believe it.

So Ben and I had lunch that day, and telling Ben about my friendship with his brother and what our time together in that dorm room meant to me vividly and richly brought back that era of my life.

We've all had a small world moment at one time or another, and they are special.
When the Holy Spirit orchestrates a connection, it unlocks tremendous joy.

We see a number of Spirit orchestrated connections at work in today's passage from Luke's gospel. (How many? Any guesses?)

The first connection is the angel Gabriel.

Last week we read about the angel Gabriel visiting Zechariah in the holy place of the Temple, announcing that his aging wife Elizabeth will give birth to a son.

Today we fast forward six months later, and Gabriel is sent once again to an unsuspecting human being just going about their business.

The angel Gabriel comes with God's word to a teenager named Mary, described in v. 27 as

“a virgin pledged to be married to Joseph.”:

Gabriel says to her, **“Greetings, you who are highly favored, God is with you!”**

Now, Gabriel prophesied that Zechariah's son would make ready a people prepared for the Lord,
But the child announced to Mary will be called
the Son of the Most High.

Not only that, this child will carry on the promise made to Joseph's ancestor, King David: his kingdom will endure forever.

In fact, this child will reign over Jacob's descendants forever.

With these words, Gabriel is not only connecting John and Jesus to one another. He's saying that these two births represent the culmination point of God's ultimate purpose for the whole people of Israel.

(For those who paid close attention, that's actually more than one connection, but for simplicity's sake I'm calling that one connection through the angel Gabriel's announcement.)

A second connection is that both of these pregnancies are miraculous.
Elizabeth because she is so old,
and Mary because she is, in a sense, so young – not yet married
and a virgin.
Neither of these women are supposed to be having babies.

A third connection is that each child is given a specific name.
Now this is weird, because parents *always* name their own children.
But these were not ordinary kids.
Gabriel told Zechariah the child's name was to be "John"
The Hebrew version of this name is Yo-hanun, which means
"Yahweh is Gracious."

"Hanun," *graciousness*, is one of the five characteristics of Yahweh
shared with Moses in Exodus 34, which we studied in November.
Graciousness is expressed in the Bible as God's favor, and so Elizabeth,
pregnant with John (*Yo-hanun*), says in v. 25,
that the Lord has shown her *favor* (hanun).

But with Mary, Gabriel says her child will be called Jesus or *Ye-shua*,
which means "Yahweh Saves."

What a connection!
Two angel visitations,
two miraculous pregnancies,
and two children who will be called
Yahweh is Gracious and Yahweh Saves.

Can you feel the joy starting to emerge from these connections?

A fourth connection is found in that both Zechariah and Mary
have concerns about this announcement.
Zechariah says, "How can I be sure?"
While Mary remarks, "How will this be since I am a virgin?"

Gabriel's response to them is the fifth and final point of connection:
A sign is given to them both:
Zechariah will not be able to speak until the promise is fulfilled.
But Mary will be overshadowed by the Holy Spirit *so that*
the one to be born will be called *the Son of God*.

Let us not roll our eyes too quickly at the idea of the virgin birth.
It's easy to miss the fact that miracle is not only about Mary.
The angel makes clear that this work of the Holy Spirit
marks out the very identity of Jesus as one
who will be uniquely called *the Son of God*.
So the virgin birth is also about the fully divine, fully human nature
of Jesus himself.

Another sign is given to Mary: Gabriel informs her that her aging relative
Elizabeth is already 6 months pregnant. (Call this a bonus sixth connection?)

With this piece of news in hand, Mary knows something Elizabeth doesn't know.
So she goes at once from Galilee south to the hills of Judea
outside of Jerusalem – to Zechariah & Elizabeth's house.

Why? To confirm that *Elizabeth* was pregnant.
Mary is going to see if she can connect all the connections
I've just mentioned.

But in v. 41 we get another surprise connection:
When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb!
Mary, freshly carrying baby Yeshua,
sparked a connection with baby Yo-hanun
who was filled with the Holy Spirit before he was born.
(For those of you keeping track, yes, this makes seven connections,
the biblical number of fulness and perfection.)

At this point the joy of these connections becomes too much to contain!
Elizabeth calls out in a loud voice,
**“Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the child you will bear!”**

Mary came there seeking confirmation about Elizabeth's
blessing as a pregnant woman,
but Elizabeth pronounces a new status upon Mary
“Blessed among women.”

Imagine how alone and confused either one could have been
if they didn't have this fellowship together?
These households had *individual* experiences that God
was doing something in their lives.

But when it's just you, you might wonder ... am I going crazy?
Is this really happening?

When they met, their experience was validated and confirmed
through this connection orchestrated by the Holy Spirit.

This is a fundamental pattern in God's activity,
God not only gives vision and insight to individuals,
but also draws these individuals together so that they can confirm,
proclaim, and explore God's initiative.
And as a result they understand themselves as blessed, as favored,
as those who can believe that what the Lord has said will be accomplished.

That's how a weary world rejoices.

What? ... Did you hear that? Someone's arguing with my sermon in their heart.

*"This is a nice story, but Pastor Matt, my life isn't like that.
There's no angels or secret messages.*

No signs and wonders, no special connections.

It's just normal and boring.

I don't think I'll ever get a miracle like God gave to Elizabeth and Mary.

What if my connections are just trivial and of little consequence?

How do I find joy in connection

if my connections don't really matter?"

Well, thank you for being honest. And I have to agree with you:
Compared with being the mother of God, or John the Baptist
and being written into the Bible itself,
your life is mind-numbingly boring.

But you know what? God loves normal and boring people.

We don't find joy by *comparing* the connections we get
to the connections that others get.

It is rightly said that "comparison is the thief of joy."

When we view our lives through God's eyes,
all our connections matter. In truth there are no pointless connections.

For instance, I played trombone growing up.

I don't play trombone any longer because I came to realize,
the trombone is not a campfire instrument.

In high school band music, the trombone parts are extremely boring.

- That meant I had practice them all by my boring self, unless we had a sectional! Sectionals are where you go and practice with all the others who are playing the same boring trombone parts that you're playing.
- What a lousy connection, right? I often thought, "What is even the point of doing this?"
- But there was something more. When the whole band comes together and each section plays their parts along with all the other sections, and I could hear my piece in the midst of everything else, it finally makes sense.
- Then the boring trombone parts are transformed into rich, resonant harmonies and base lines, and my sense of purpose in that that song became clear.

God works like this in our lives.

Most people don't have amazing life stories that end up in the Bible.

But the Holy Spirit orchestrates our lives – seemingly ordinary –
to function alongside others
that create a beautiful symphony of life.

When we see these connections they confirm, clarify,
and expand our own sense of identity and purpose.

So never discount your role in the lives of others.

Never discount your role
in the God's mission of love and reconciliation.

It is impossible for any one of us to see the complete impact
that our lives have in the world. Our lives ripple out for generations.

But God sees it all, and orchestrates connections big and small
that together unlock the tremendous joy
of God with us.