

BELPRES CHURCH

Greater Joy

Luke 1:26-38, 46-55

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Great to see all of you here. Thank you for joining us. Those of you here in the room as well as those of you who are joining us online, thank you for being here. Scripture this morning comes from Luke 1, and it says this. In the six months 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 greeting this might be. "But the angel said to her, do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You'll conceive and give birth to a son and 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?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her. So, Holy Spirit, thank you for your word, and please use it to help us be more like Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Well, recently, I saw a picture online that's kind of about mismatched expectations between people, and it said this: Never tie your shoes in Paris. I don't know if you can see that or not, but if you do that, someone may think you're proposing when you're not, and that could be a very awkward conversation afterwards. And I wondered, do you ever sometimes feel like life is like this for you, that there are mismatched expectations? Like you're expecting something like a proposal, but reality of your life is just tying its

shoe? If I were Mary, that's how I would've felt, in the text that I just read. When the angel comes and says, "Will you be the mother of Jesus?" I might've felt that what I was expecting and what the angel just told me were really different things. And yet Mary willingly sacrifices her expectations, her plans, her everything for the promise God gives her of being part of his rescue mission to the world.

Here at Bell Press, one of the things we are focused on is being disciples of Jesus. Disciples are people who are becoming like Jesus, and one of the things disciples do is they live sacrificially, which sounds great, except for the sacrificially part, because sacrifice is hard. And as I said last week, many of you may feel like your life is nothing but sacrifice, and you are exhausted with sacrificing. But one of the things we all have to ask ourselves is are the sacrifices I'm making to exceed in school or work or earn other people's approval or whatever it is, or have my kids involved in lots of activities, are those the sacrifices God is asking of us, or are those culturally driven by our assumptions, cultural assumptions about what the good life is?

And then there's many of us, many of you, who are actually making the sacrifices Jesus is asking of you, and maybe you are a little tired. And I hope what you hear in this sermon is encouragement, and I hope if you're making sacrifices God is asking you to make, that what you hear in this sermon is well done. Well done. Because living sacrificially in the things that Jesus actually calls us to live sacrificially about, it does bring greater joy. It makes life harder, but it also makes it bigger, richer, deeper, greater joy. If we sacrifice some of our obsession to have a fancier job or make more money or be more well respected or whatever it is, we're going to have less stress and more freedom in our life. Nothing wrong with those things, but if we focus on them too much, they become a prison for us.

And I know that what keeps me from the greater joy that Jesus wants to give me, I know that what keeps me from that is my reluctance to sacrifice at least in some areas. But Mary shows us how living sacrificially leads to so much more. One of the bravest people in the Bible is a teenaged girl named Mary. God comes to her with this very big ask, right? It's a big ask. Will you be the mother of Jesus? Will you be the mother of the Savior of the world? This is a big ask. This is not what "Will you do me a favor, Mary?" This is a big sacrifice he's asking, and if I were Mary, I would've asked a few more questions. I don't know about you. She seems to say "Okay" pretty quickly. I would've had a few more questions.

The angel says, "Greetings. You who are highly favored," and what is this great favor that Mary gets for Christmas? Well, when the angel says "You're going to have a son, and he's going to save the world," she says, "How will this be, since I'm a virgin?" Great question, and maybe laden with some anxiety, since it's a miraculous conception that the angel is talking about, what it means is that for Christmas, Mary gets to be pregnant and unmarried in a culture where the penalty for that was at minimum being an outcast for the

rest of her life and potentially even executed and put to death for adultery. She gets to give birth to her son in a dirty barn surrounded by animals with animal stuff everywhere. Then she has to flee to Egypt as a refugee to escape the insane king who's trying to kill her son. And on top of all of that, she will watch her son die on a cross to pay the price for your sins and mine. And this makes her the favored one? Yes. Absolutely, yes.

Because in spite of all of that, there was some cool stuff. Like that first Christmas night, she gets to hold God coming in human form in the person of Jesus in her arms. She gets to see her son raised from the dead. She gets to see her son turn water into wine at a wedding because they ran out and Jesus keeps the party going. God promises her that generations will call her blessed, and that's what happened. For 2000 years, she's been revered as one of the greatest heroes of the Christian faith. Hail, oh favored one, indeed. Her sacrificial living, even though it was hard, led to a much greater joy. And I think one of the most powerful verses in the Bible is when Mary says, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." There is so much power in her "Yes" to sacrifice, for her and what she's going to experience, but also for the whole world through her.

And in saying "Yes," she's inviting God to invade her life in some key areas. First, in her "Yes," what she's actually saying to God is "God, invade my plans." When I was a college pastor, I officiated a wedding for a student of mine that was the most over-planned wedding I have ever seen in my life. People had written special poems that they read for the occasion, and all the colors of the flowers all had symbolic meaning. But the strangest part was that the groom came to my house the night before the wedding and asked to read over the wedding talk that I was going to give the next day at his wedding. And as he was reading it over, he kept saying things like, "Mmm, ooh, mmm, mmm, mmm, no." And then he took a red pen off my desk and started making corrections on my wedding talk. And what really bugged me was that was the same red pen I used to correct student essays when I was a teacher. And I said, "This is the night before your wedding. Shouldn't you be at a bachelor party or something? This is not healthy, my son." Now give me my pen back.

The wedding turned out fine, but because there was so much planned, because they had so much planned for their wedding, there actually ended up not being enough time for dancing at the reception, which for some people was a disappointment, but for me was divine intervention because I don't like to dance. He had a lot of plans for his wedding. Mary had a lot of plans for hers, I'm sure. She's engaged to be married to Joseph, which means she's about 14, 13, 14, 15, somewhere. That's when girls got engaged back then. She's got to plan the wedding. She's got to buy all the flowers. She's got to get enough wine, because you wouldn't want to run out of wine at a wedding, right? That's an illusion. Nevermind.

God interrupts all of those plans, and Mary says, "Yes." How many of us, when God asks us to do something, serve in his name, tell people about Jesus, give sacrificially to his work, forgive someone who hurt us, how many of us say to God, "If you say so, I will. Even if it interrupts my plans, God, go ahead, interrupt my plans." Because I don't know about you, but I don't like it when my plans get interrupted. I've got lots of plans. I know the plans I have for me, and I like the plans I have for me, plans to make me happy. And I don't want those plans to be interrupted. But Mary understands that when the supernatural power of Jesus is at work, what might first appear as an interruption to us is actually a greater joy in disguise. And when Jesus is guiding, there is life in the interruptions.

And some of you are experiencing interruptions in your life right now, and some of those interruptions may be from God, and they are invitations for you into a greater joy, even though they seem really hard right now. Others of you, your life is being interrupted by things that maybe didn't come from God, a health problem, a financial problem, a relationship problem. Some of you have had to leave the country you grew up in and come here. And God may not have caused those interruptions, but God is present in them and can use them to bring you a greater joy. Are we interruptible? Are we interruptible? God invaded my plans.

Second thing Mary is saying with her "Yes" is "God, invade my reputation," because to be unmarried and pregnant in that culture would've made her a social outcast for the rest of her life. But the greater joy is that God is saying, "I'm going to invade your reputation, and you'll be identified with my son and his glory and his power and his victory, and you won't care anymore what other people think about you. You'll be free from their opinion." And that is a greater joy than constantly worrying about our image and our reputation and what people think of us. Are we willing to let God invade our reputation and be identified with Jesus in some way?

Third thing she is saying is "God, invade the world through me." A few verses after the ones I read, Mary actually breaks out singing. And in her song she says this, "My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God and my Savior, for the Mighty One has done great things for me." Yes, Jesus comes to save the whole world, but this is also for her, personally. 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. That's the subversive song. All that talk about overthrowing the rich and bringing the rich down and the poor up, she's talking about a revolution, except as you go on in the Bible, it's not like a human revolution, but just swap who's on the top and who's on the bottom, but there's still a top and there's still a bottom? Jesus is going to get rid of top and bottom altogether.

Let's talk about the kingdom of God where people with power and money and power, those who don't have those things to rise above their station, where injustice gets

corrected and the pain in this world gets healed. And I find it interesting that she starts singing this song. As if Mary isn't in enough trouble already, she busts out singing with this revolutionary song. This would make a great musical, right? This is the scene in the musical where, "Can you hear the people sing?" singing it. That's what Mary's doing here, singing this revolutionary song. And she's happy about it. This is not a lament. She burst into song because not only has God interrupted her life, but God is going to interrupt darkness and injustice and poverty through her, and she gets to be part of it.

She took on King Herod who launched a genocide just to kill her son. She took him on and she won. She stared down the mean nasty gossips in her hometown that would've said all kinds of terrible things about her behind her back. She followed Jesus all the way to the cross when all his male disciples chickened out. Only she had the courage to follow him to the cross, and she saw him raised from the dead three days later. And because of her willingness to sacrifice, she changed the world. God, invade my plans, God, invade my reputation, God, invade the world through me, and finally, God, invade my day-to-day.

In the Bible, we'd be the high points of Mary's life, but 98% of Mary's life would've been taken up with just day-to-day acts of faithfulness and sacrifice to be the mother of Jesus, which I think would've been really hard. Not because Jesus was bad, but because he was perfect. Can you imagine how irritating it would be to have a perfect child? You couldn't even send him to his room. You can't send the Son of God to his room. He'd send you to your room. Her life would've been just these daily little sacrifices, day in, day out, that very few people would've seen. When we think of sacrificial living, I think often, particularly if we go to church, when we think sacrificial living, we think like that means big things, like go be a missionary or start a nonprofit. And yes, sometimes that is the call. But more often, sacrificial living happens in little daily acts of faithfulness and sacrifice that very few people see, and some of you're making those day in, day out.

God sees them. God sees them, and God says, "Well done." And God promises there will be a greater joy. I was talking with some friends this week and one of them was saying that he was struggling with thinking about is this all there is? He's kind of bored. Life feels really dull. Life feels really routine. As he's talking about all this, he just casually mentioned that there's a 17-year-old guy in his neighborhood who had found out that his dad had been having an affair for a long time, and now his parents were getting divorced. And this 17-year-old was angry at his dad and was wondering, now who's going to be my male role model to show me what it means to be a man of integrity, because my dad isn't clearly going to do it? And my friend said that he's been kind of taking time out of his busy schedule to have long great conversations with this 17-year-old, and is becoming a kind of mentor to this guy.

And so in the middle of him complaining that his life was dull and routine, he stopped and he said, "Well, so there's that. And that's cool." Yes, it is cool, because over time,

who knows what that could become? My friend will be someone this 17-year-old will say, "He changed my life by showing me what it means to be a man of integrity." Now that for my friend will involve some day-to-day sacrifices of time and conversation that nobody's going to see, but it's going to lead to that greater joy of knowing that he's changed someone's life.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I find it easier to sacrifice for the big things because they appeal to my desire for greatness. But sacrificing in smaller ways that nobody sees is sometimes harder. Things like be kind to the airline clerk when your flight is massively delayed. Maybe for some of you to step out of your comfort zone and say hi to someone after the service, to create a little bit of community.

I mean, I have heard men say things like, "I'd take a bullet for my wife." Awesome. How about you start with just doing the dishes for her? Never underestimate the power of small daily acts of sacrifice that over time add up. The way you sacrifice some of what you want to empower your spouse or your kids or your parents or your friends, the way you don't go along with the crowd when the crowd is going the wrong way. Man, before I was a Christian, one of the things that I was impressed by were Christians who could resist the peer pressure to gossip in the office or drink too much at a party or cut corners ethically. And I admired the way that they could resist, the strength that they had inside of them to resist peer pressure. And I wanted the freedom that they had. Never underestimate small daily sacrifices that you make to do what God is calling you to do. And many of you are making those, and God says to you, "Well done. Well done."

When I was eight, my dad took a class that went through the entire Bible at the church that we were part of. It was a two-year class, went through the whole Bible, and this class was serious business. There were graded tests in this class. Can you imagine graded tests in a church class? So he had to study a lot. And at one point I asked if I could help him study. And okay, I was a squirrely eight-year-old, not always focused eight-year-old. I wasn't going to be able to help him study very much. I was going to be more of a burden than a help. But my dad took the time to write out flashcards with all kinds of questions on them, and then the answers, and I would ask him. I'd read the questions from those cards, I'd ask him them, and man, I had so much fun when he got the answer wrong. Because what eight-year-old doesn't want to correct their parents, right? "No, it was Baltazar. You got that wrong, dad."

Sometimes, parents are called to make sacrifices to enter their kids' worlds. Other times, as with my dad, he made sacrifices so I could enter his. He had a full-time job and was taking this Bible class. He could have studied way more efficiently without me, but he chose to do it with me. And the result was that I learned the entire Bible when I was eight years old, alongside of my dad, and connected with him on a spiritual level. Now here's the thing. What's interesting is a year or two later after that, we stopped going to church

altogether, and a little bit later on I decided there was no God, and I called myself an atheist until I became a Christian in college.

And then my dad, seeing when I became a Christian in college, my dad seeing that, that led him to eventually return to Jesus and recommit his life to Jesus, and then my mom and my siblings followed. And I believe that the time I spent, quote, helping my dad study, I believe that planted a seed in me that the Holy Spirit used to eventually lead me and my entire family back to Jesus when we had wandered away. And that has blessed us in countless ways, including when my parents' health began to fail.

And the fact that we all followed Jesus meant we all had supernatural resources to draw on for hope and comfort and courage in the middle of that, doctors and social workers and nurses kept saying to us, "Wow, you guys are a really functional family." And my siblings and I would be like, "Yeah, no, not really," but that we shared a common faith in Jesus allowed us to work really well together. My dad let God invade his plans in order to include me, potentially sacrificing some of his reputation if my, quote, help caused him to do worse in the class, whereas it could have, he let God invade his day-to-day ordinary life, and it changed me and it brought me to Jesus.

And if I have helped anyone, or made the world even just a little better in some way, some of that goes back to my dad's decision to live sacrificially for me. Not in a huge way, not in "I'm going to start a nonprofit way," although his son, who leads this church that has started nonprofits, so he did that. He got that done in a way. And one of the things I'm so appreciative about that is when I was growing up, my dad and I often had a hard time connecting, but because of his sacrifice, my dad and I both got the greater joy of connecting with each other on a spiritual level, which blessed him and me. And then later when I became a Christian and then pastor that leads this church, which he loved, he loved this church, I would occasionally remind him how crucial his willingness to slow down his studying so that I could help him was to my spiritual development. And for him, that's a much greater joy than just passing some Bible class at church.

But here's the important thing, I think, or at least one of the things I want to say. Here's the thing. My dad didn't see the fruit of his sacrifice for decades. Decades. I mean all through high school and immediately after high school, let's just put it this way. I did not show a lot of spiritual promise. I would've been voted least likely to become a pastor, most likely to do a whole bunch of other stuff, but least likely to become a pastor. So my dad didn't see the reward of that for decades. But by letting God invade his day-to-day, my dad helped plant a seed of faith in me that years later drew me to Jesus. Never underestimate the power of small daily sacrifices that add up over time.

So this week, pray two prayers. First, Jesus, are the sacrifices I'm making the ones you're asking of me, or are they culturally driven? And then discern that through prayer and scripture and the input of other people. And then second, Jesus, invade my... And then

you pick. My plans, my reputation, the world through me, my ordinary day-to-day life. Jesus, invade that. And then see where he leads you. From this point on in the story, Mary's life is going to get really hard, but also really amazing, and really big, and really cool.

Mary was planning a nice peaceful life with Joseph. Have a couple kids, maybe move to the suburbs, but God said, "I have a much greater joy for you than that, Mary. I don't want you to just give birth to a kid. I want you to give birth to a King. I don't want you to just raise a son. I want you to raise a Savior. I don't want you to just have a family. I want you to have a faith that's worth dying for, and more importantly, that's worth living for, and you, Mary, you, an unknown girl from an unknown place, you're going to do this, and it is going to interrupt your life and it is going to mess with your plans in some really glorious ways. But you, Mary, you are the one that is going to do this, and his name is going to be Jesus, and the world is never going to be the same, because you said 'Yes.'"

So what greater joy is God calling you into? And how could your life and this world change when you say "Yes"? So Jesus, thank you that you do call us into greater joy, sacrifices that when we get on the other side actually weren't sacrifices at all, because they led to something deeper. Thank you that you do that, Jesus. And Lord, help us to see the ones you're calling us to, and see the ones you're not calling us to, and then help us step into that greater joy that you put in front of us. And then, Lord, help us to step into it in a way that shows the world that you are the author of all joy, and we will point to you and give you our praise. In your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following (note: we use the same scripture reflection questions each week so that we can practice using the same tools over time as we examine different scriptures):

- What do you feel when you read this scripture (excited, angry, worried, etc....)? Why do you think that is? (Explain in your group and then take that response to Jesus in prayer this week.)
- As you read this scripture, where does it challenge your current cultural context?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- From these texts, how does Mary see herself? How do you think God sees her?
- What do you admire most about Mary?
- What lessons do you take from her life on what it means to live sacrificially?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.