



Most of us know we're supposed to rejoice at Christmas. But how many of us feel pressure coming on us rather than praise coming out of us? Our reading shows us some deep feeling that is available for everyone. The scene is fairly ordinary; two pregnant women, a family visit and a conversation in a home. But, without warning, heaven breaks in. A Baby leaps, the Spirit fills and Praise erupts because Jesus is present. He evokes joy and signals God's fulfilment of covenant promises. And that's good news

for us because it means joy is not the result of pretending everything is fine. No. Joy comes from recognising what God has done and what God is doing despite at that moment being the size of a foetus. Our response to Jesus tells us a lot about our heart, and these women get it! The right response is great joy; not forced shallow or pain-denying joy, but deep, rugged, gritty, Spirit-shaped joy.

Elizabeth's Joy After the angel leaves Mary she hurries to Judea to visit her relative, Elizabeth. Elizabeth is 6 months pregnant and we read, "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." The presence of this unborn child causes such an eruption that the child leaps, What we have in our text today is a true, candid celebration! My son A. has been enjoying advent calendars with chocolate. A. will always shout and run to shove his hand in every pocket until he finds chocolate and then he shouts and shows it to everyone before eating it. He celebrates each morning and we (and probably the neighbours) hear about it! The same is true of Mary and Elizabeth. There is no holding back. Their neighbours are going to hear about it! The whole town probably hears it. Elizabeth, and her baby John, being filled with the Spirit is a fulfilment of what the angel said to her husband Zechariah in Luke 1:15, "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit before he is born." Note how the first human response to the incarnate Christ is John leaping in the womb. Isn't that amazing?! He appointed an unborn child to be the first person to respond to Jesus! Joy flows from the person of Christ. Elizabeth's joy, and so too our joy, is a Spirit-filled joy in response to fellowship with Jesus. What Elizabeth is saying is from the Spirit In verse 43. She says, "But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Elizabeth calls Jesus her Lord. Unborn Jesus, foetus Jesus, was her Lord. Paul in 1 Corinthians writes, "No one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit." Elizabeth's great news is she has been blessed late on in life with a miraculous baby. All her life she was childless, and now, in God's providence, she is with child. It is wonderful and there is much to be celebrated. Yet, in this moment, her joy is eclipsed. There is another baby in this room, one who is worthy of greater celebration. Elizabeth, humbly, lays her rejoicing aside and rejoices with Mary. She refers to her baby only once saying, "As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy." Elizabeth is caught up in rejoicing in the baby that Mary will bear. Elizabeth's baby, John, does the very same thing later in his life expressing his understanding that his role as the forerunner was to point people to Jesus, not himself, John says about Jesus, "He must become greater; I must become less." The humility of John is modelled in his mother Elizabeth. It is a gift of the Spirit to experience other's joys and rejoice in them, even if people's experiences exceed our own. We may look at those around us and be tempted to be jealous of the skills or talents, or their friends and their family, or their significance; you name it. Instead of rejoicing with those who rejoice and saying "PRAISE GOD FOR THAT!" when we hear of how the Lord has blessed someone, we grit our teeth and think of the areas that we are lacking. That's not the way of joy. We need the Spirit to go to work in our hearts. Changing us, shaping us in the image of Christ; into His humility and helping us to think of ourselves less. To look up more than we look in and delight in what God is doing in the lives of others. Our response to the work of God tells us a lot about our heart. Elizabeth could rejoice in Jesus because, although Mary is bearing Him, he is Elizabeth's saviour. Let us rejoice in Jesus and so share in Elizabeth's joy this Christmas.

Mary's Joy When the angel appeared to Mary we marvelled at her simple and humble response. She said, verse 38, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled." But

now, Joy grows greater by expression. "Happiness communicated doubles itself. Grief grows greater by concealing; joy grows greater by expression." We are called to share our joys so that they can be everyone's joys and so everyone can give thanks to God for his blessing. We are also called to share our griefs and sorrows, so they too can be everyone's sorrows and be brought before God. Paul writes, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." There will be higher heights of joy and greater depths of sorrow this way, but that is community, that is family, that is church. Spending time together as a community is how we are called to live. We live too separately these days. We can share news by text and email but we're not in one another's lives as we ought to be. The Christian walk is a walk in community! At best it is dangerous to try it alone. Sure, we should use technology but let's not substitute it from meeting together in person. I'm not just talking about Sundays. Are church and homegroups unmoveable things in your calendar or is it something you go to if you've got nothing better to do? And let's get around to those who can't get out of their house. Let's not let them think that we've forgotten them. J. C. Ryle says this, "First let us seek the face of God, then let us seek the face of God's friends. If we did this more... we [would] know more of what it is to feel filled with the Holy Spirit." Mary's joy grew because she shared it. She says, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me; holy is his name." Mary expresses her faith in what she cannot see but knows will happen. Some have said that her words are similar to the prayer of praise that Hannah brings to God after being blessed with her son Samuel. These are words of a woman who knows God. In verse 48 she is right, all generations will call her blessed and we do wrong to say otherwise. We don't need to lift her up to the station that she is held by our catholic friends, but she is blessed. This is not just Elizabeth's joy, this is not just Mary's joy. This baby is to be...

The People's Joy In the second part of Mary's song, her focus shifts onto the work of God throughout the centuries. She sees herself as part of a much larger group of people who delight in the Lord. She understands that what she is experiencing in the present is the unfolding of the same divine faithfulness shown to Israel in the past. It is clear from her words that Mary called to mind how the Lord was faithful to Israel even when they were faithless. She saw that all that God was doing in her own life was the familiar pattern of the covenant God at work. This was a continuation of grace and mercy from that same God. The famous carol 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' captures the sentiment in Mary's song "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." This God is fulfilling his covenant promises to His people in Jesus. Since Adam and Eve walked headlong into sin, the world has hoped for this child who would crush the serpent's head. As the years went by the hope for this child grew stronger and stronger. "He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors." (v.54) The world is holding its breath in hope for this child, this ruler, the Messiah, Lord, God Himself, Jesus to come. "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

Name your fears, this child born in Bethlehem meets them. Three decades later He conquers death, the sting is taken out. Sin has been dealt with for all those who believe in Him. In loneliness he meets us, adopts us and promises nothing can separate us from his love. In grief he grieves with us, intercedes for us and upholds us by His strength. In lack he provides; in anxiety he shows his sovereign authority; he reigns over tomorrow. Name the dark streets of your fears and the Everlasting Light shines there. We all carry hopes and fears into Christmas. Hope that something might change. Fear that it won't. Hope for healing, for justice, for peace. Fear that the world, or our lives, are too broken. This passage is written for people like us. As we gaze at so great a blessing and as we delight in it together in community, let the Spirit bring forth such great joy in us.