

“Impossible Joy”

Luke 1:46b-55; Luke 1:26-38 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – December 20, 2020

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be opened to all that is possible with you. In the name of the One coming into the world, Amen.

Would you call to mind for me, please, the last time you leaped? Have you been doing any leaping lately? Yes, leaping, not keeping or bleeping or weeping. Have you leapt recently? Can you even remember the last time you considered leaping? The last time some little part of you felt like leaping? I’m guessing for most of us it’s been way too long. It has occurred to me that we don’t talk about leaping nearly enough in church. Which is really too bad, because if you think about it deeply enough, it becomes clear that leaping is a primal and pure expression of faith.

Perhaps you are curious why I bring up leaping when our scriptures readings involve two pregnant women. Presumably, leaping is not recommended for those who are great with child. And yet, leaping is hovering on the edges of our worship today. In the verses between the two passages we heard from Luke, when newly pregnant Mary arrives at the home of her six-months pregnant cousin Elizabeth, the child in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy at the sound of Mary’s greeting. Mary’s song, the Magnificat, is a response to Elizabeth’s interpretation of that leap of joy. More obscurely, the second verse of our opening song also references leaping, in a way that might feel even more relevant to our lives at the moment.

“In deepest night his coming shall be, when all the world is despairing, as morning light so quiet and free, so warm and gentle and caring. Then shall the silent join in song, the tired shall leap in wonder, the weak be raised above the strong, and weapons be broken asunder.” The second half of that verse almost sounds like a paraphrase of The Magnificat. Did you hear what it says? “The tired shall leap in wonder.” Could anything sound more impossible? I could see the tired nodding in appreciation or giving a weak grin, but leaping? God’s people in the year 2020 know from tired, and leaping is not on our list of likely responses.

We really are in need of a more robust theology of leaping it seems. I’m not sure why Christian tradition hasn’t already settled this. If you consider the idioms related to leaping, they clearly point to leaping as an action of faith. The two words most closely associated with leap are faith – as in “leap of faith” – and joy – as in “leap for joy” like pre-natal John the Baptist did. So then, if we examine the phenomena these idioms are aiming to describe, we see the unspoken presence of God. A “leap of faith” is when we embark on a venture that logic tells us we do not have the resources to accomplish. Faith is involved precisely because unless God shows up to help us out, we are going to fail. “Leaping for joy” is not something anyone plans or chooses to do. It is an almost involuntary response to a sudden outside stimulus, what I dare say we could call the popping in of the Holy Spirit. Leaping for joy doesn’t depend on whether we feel like leaping is possible or not; it is initiated by God.

When we read this passage about Gabriel's announcement to Mary and her humble assent, it's easy to get caught up in the why-and-how of being "overshadowed by the Holy Spirit." But did you notice that it's not in reference to Mary's pregnancy that Gabriel says that "nothing will be impossible for God". When he says that, he's talking about Elizabeth's late-in-life pregnancy. Apparently, the more seemingly impossible thing is the challenge to years of disappointment and judgment and adjusted expectations and derogatory labels. The longer we've had to think about it and come up with reasons why things won't work, the more things get added to our list of what's impossible.

But God didn't get that memo. God pays no heed to our assumptions and expectations and limited imaginations. While we're sitting around debating whether food security for all people is achievable or whether homelessness even can be solved, God is out there doing it, waiting for us to join in. While we're gnashing our teeth and putting our energy into sharp-witted quips about corruption in government, God is out there making rickety the thrones of the powerful. "Nothing will be impossible with God," Gabriel says. And once Mary has heard this good news, she sings (and dances?) because she knows this impossible gospel is not just for her, but for the whole world.

In this hard, cheerless winter, when all the world is despairing, the impossibility of joy seems like a scandalous thing to wish for. Asking the tired to consider leaping is almost offensive. But again, leaping for joy is not something we do because we've

decided to; taking a leap of faith isn't something we do because it's feasible. Gabriel didn't say "nothing will be impossible"; he said, "nothing will be impossible with God."

Why does leaping feel impossible for you? Does it seem incompatible with the current state of your body? Elizabeth was barren. God can surely find a way for you to leap, whether it involves your body or the legs of your heart. Are you afraid of falling? Would you dare to rejoice, if you weren't so terrified of disappointment? God doesn't promise a life of constant happiness, but of constant presence. Emmanuel – God-with-us – is here to catch us when we stumble, to hold us close when life twists and turns in difficult ways. Is leaping beneath your dignity? Are you simply unwilling to risk looking silly? Who are we to cling to dignity when our Savior was born in a barn?

If Mary and Elizabeth's stories teach us anything, it's that the definition of "possible" isn't up to us. December 2020 is a ridiculous time to seek joy, but Christmas is coming anyway. In these last few days, as we prepare to welcome the Christ Child, perhaps we can stretch our minds and hearts a little wider than the sorrow and cynicism of our times have allowed them to open. God is, this very moment, subverting the powers that be and filling the hungry with good things. We would do well to practice our leaping a little, whether in body or soul, so that we'll be ready to join in when our moment arrives. Hallelujah and Amen.