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*Luke 1:24-45*

*After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ‘This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.’*

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.’ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’ Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ The angel said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.’ Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her.*

*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’*

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**CW: Infertility**

Each week of Advent we’re giving a different answer to the following question: “How Does a Weary World Rejoice?” Last week, we answered that question by reminding ourselves that “We Acknowledge our Weariness.” Together, we journeyed through the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth who were indeed weary after many, many years of failing to conceive a child. And yet, when we make space for our weariness together, we find surprising opportunities for joy in the midst of the messiness.

This week, we respond to that question, “How Does a Weary World Rejoice” with a different answer: “We Find Joy in Connection.” I would surmise that most of us intuitively know this to be true on a theological level. Church is, after all, at its best, a place for us to find joy in connection with one another and in the God who calls us as a neighborhood for such a time as this. But I offer this morning that the statement “We Find Joy in Connection” isn’t merely a theological statement; it’s a scientific, biological, and indeed, a *neurological* statement.

My therapist has a favorite saying: “Neurons that fire together, wire together.” When we stimulate a portion of our brain during an activity such as, say, baking Christmas cookies with a family member, it creates memory. And that memory is accessed when the brain learns to activate those same neurons again. So, the joy that is accessed because of that connection isn’t just because of the relational connection, but the neurological connection that’s happening as a result. Hence, “neurons that fire together, wire together.”

It’s a remarkably beautiful part of the how God created us to be; we are literally hardwired for social connection. And, as many of us know, it’s particularly heartbreaking when we or those we love suffer with dementia, Alzheimers, trauma, depression, anxiety, and other conditions that interrupt or impair those neurological connections. But the good news is that those severed connections can often be rebuilt or rewired through social connection.

For example, my wife Tricia, who is a licensed therapist, shared with me an article about how “social touch is essential to our mental well-being and can reduce stress and pain while helping us bond with one another.”[[1]](#footnote-2) There’s a reason that we saw such an intense spike in mental health crises during the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Deprived of the physical touch of our fellow human beings, many of us struggled to maintain our mental health. This was because the consensual physical connections we have with our spouse or partner, our children, parents, or siblings, our friends, and our neighbors are a vital part of strengthening those neural connections that allow us to feel joy, peace, safety, and fulfillment. Such social connections have been shown to help improve the quality of life for people with PTSD, Alzheimer’s, and chronic anxiety.

And the severing of those connections can be particularly painful during the month of December, especially for those who have lost loved ones recently. And, because of this, it should also be noted that the strengthening of those connections goes beyond merely human interactions. We can strengthen those neural connections through our relationships with ourselves, our bodies, to God, in nature, and the whole world around us. The work of the Church is also about cultivating a connectional community where we hold joy for one another, even and especially in the moments when we struggle to hold that joy for ourselves.

Today’s passage from Luke’s Gospel gifts us a story about the connection between two women navigating a profoundly bizarre situation made even more complex by the social stigmas of their time. Take, for example, Elizabeth. She was a woman whose age and struggles with infertility led her to seclude herself for the first five months of her unexpected pregnancy. Was it because she was worried that the gossip would begin that perhaps she became pregnant with a man other than Zechariah? Or was it that she had endured many miscarriages before and couldn’t stand the thought of letting the “cat out of the bag” only to lose another? The text doesn’t tell us, but the ambiguity makes room for those among us who know all too well what those situations feels like. As your pastor, if you know what that feels like, know that you are seen, you are loved, you are whole just the way you are, and there is room for you here.

I think Mary intuitively knew that Elizabeth needed connection. So often, this passage has been interpreted through the lens of the older Elizabeth giving shelter and nurture to the younger Mary. And that certainly is a faithful interpretation, but it need not be our only one. What if we approach this text from another angle? “Perhaps Mary’s arrival is what pulls Elizabeth out of her seclusion, allowing her to experience joy and delight.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

Friends, we all need connection and sometimes we need those around us to pull us out of our seclusion, whether that seclusion is of our own making or not. It’s remarkable, when you think about it, that Jesus, before he’s even born, is already cultivating connections between people. And it’s equally remarkable that John the Baptist, in utero, is already bearing witness to the work of God in the world. He leaps within Elizabeth’s womb as if to say, “Look! Neurons are firing and wiring together! God is already mothering connection into the world, making room for joy in spaces fraught with uncertainty, fear, and messiness!”

Y’all, those connections, whether big or small, save us everyday. This story reminds us that the beginning of Christ’s journey here on this earth was about bringing people together in ways that saved them. And we need saving. We need connection. We need joy!

And so, y’all are going to help me finish this sermon.

Earlier in the service I offered a simple question: “What connections are giving you joy these days?”

(*Solicit responses from the congregation)*

Thank you for sharing these connections! My prayer this day is that God would bless each and every one of them and grant you an abundant sense of gratitude for how that connection is saving you. For we do exist in a weary world, my friends.

But in those weary moments, I’m reminded of that great first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. “What is the chief end of humanity?” The answer: “Humanity’s chief end is to glorify God and to *enjoy* God forever.” These connections are how we do just that!

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s connected children, say: **Amen.**

1. https://www.washingtonpost.com/wellness/2023/02/09/social-touch-calm-anxiety-loneliness/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. From Sanctified Art’s sermon guide for “How Does a Weary World Rejoice?” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)