

CIC 12-14-25

As many of you know, for college and most of my adulthood I lived in the great city of New Orleans LA. And when a lot of people think of New Orleans, they think of it as a Southern city, but it's actually very different from a lot of the South. For starters it was originally a French and later Spanish colony before it was American, and then after the Louisiana purchase, a lot of the same immigrants that came to the Northeast also went there, like the Irish, the Italians, the Germans, Latin Americans. As a result, one major facet of New Orleanian culture is its Catholic heritage, it's not a predominantly protestant place like most of the South. That heritage shows up all over the place, Whether it's the institutions like the schools, including mine Loyola, or the Carnival Season that goes from Epiphany to Fat Tuesday, or even the streets where people drive, walk, and live. There's a Saint Charles Avenue, a Saint Bernard Ave, Saint Claude Avenue, Saint Roch Ave, Saint Louis St, Saint Andrew st, Saint Peter st, Saint Phillip St, Saint Anne st, even a Religious St and a Piety St. It was a Catholic world, I was just living, walking and biking in it.

I used to live less than a block away from one particularly strongly named street called Annunciation st. That's at least 5-6 syllables in one word. (Show Picture Ray)

Because I'm not Catholic, I grew up Non-denominational, I didn't entirely know what Annunciation referred to, we never used that term in my family or home church, but it turns out it's something I've commemorated for a long time. Annunciation is an English version of the old French and Latin word for announcement. And THE Annunciation was the announcement from the angel Gabriel to the virgin Mary of the conception and birth of Jesus that was about to take place in her and through her.

So it turns out that the Annunciation is something that I had been celebrating every December since I was born.

And the Annunciation is where we will be starting our Christmas series on Jesus today.

We will be turning to Luke's Gospel. If you love Luke's Gospel, this is the Sunday for you. If you don't, well here's a chance to get more acquainted with Luke's storytelling, because we'll be reading a lot of Luke today!

Luke 1:28-38

28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. **30** But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. **31** You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. **32** 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, **33** and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

34 “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

35 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. **36** Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. **37** For no word from God will ever fail.”

38 “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

This is not the only announcement to Mary, there’s more

Luke 1:39-45

39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, **40** where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. **41** When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. **42** In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! **43** But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? **44** As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. **45** Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”

In case God was concerned that receiving the first message in a supernatural encounter with the angel Gabriel was not enough to truly convince Mary of what he was doing, her own cousins, both Elizabeth, and Elizabeth’s son, the unborn John, still in the womb, were filled with the Holy Spirit to confirm what was happening. God really was doing this.

In yet another angelic announcement, God communicated the birth of Jesus not to Mary, but to an unassuming group of Shepherds.

Luke 2:8-14

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. **9** An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone

around them, and they were terrified. **10** But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. **11** Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. **12** This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” **13** Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, **14** “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

It might sound cliché or redundant to say that what was announced in these annunciations was good. Many of us have probably heard these scriptures many times, have been through so many Christmas celebrations that if someone asked us if what was announced to Mary and the Shepherds was good, we’d probably say of course. Even non-Christians celebrate Christmas because the idea that this is a good, beautiful, noble event to celebrate has seeped into our culture.

But even if it feels redundant, I want us to intentionally look at the words Luke wrote to get a better sense of their goodness.

Let’s start with what was said to the shepherds

Luke 2:10-11

10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. **11** Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

Good News that will cause great joy, A Savior has been born, the Messiah, the Lord. In other words, the one that has been promised and prophesied for generations, the one you’ve been wondering and looking forward to, that is who we are announcing. This is good news, that is cause for joy for all people, and it is good news for all people, not just the Jewish people, but for everyone. This is someone, a savior, an authority, a king that all of us should be excited about, that will be good for all of us. Good news, that will cause great joy for all people.

And this word, joy, is repeated elsewhere. When Mary is with Elizabeth in her house and John in Elizabeth’s womb, Elizabeth said this in her prophetic message.

Luke 1:44

44 As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.

John leapt for joy Why?

Luke 1:43

43 But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?

The pregnant mother of the Lord, once again, the one that has been promised, the savior, the king, the chosen one, has visited them. The one John is born to pave the way for is here. There's a powerful, divine thread, connecting both mothers, and both wombs in that room.

Luke 1:45

45 Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Previously Elizabeth addressed Mary, saying blessed are YOU among women, but now she is using the third person. Blessed is SHE who has believed. Thus Elizabeth does not just see God fulfilling his promise to Mary, but she sees him fulfilling his promise to herself and her family. She has this profound proof within her and right next to her that God is faithful to His promises through and through!

In Mary's response to these annunciations, you see Joy again

Luke 1:46-48a

46 And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord **47** and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, **48** for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

My spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. Mary rejoices because she sees the extent of God's love and care for her. And going back to the shepherds and the angelic annunciation to them, how do they respond?

Luke 2:15-18, 20

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." **16** So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. **17** When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, **18** and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them...**20** The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

They go and see, and they witness the physical, living, breathing fulfillment of everything the angel said right in front of them. They see their faith, their joy, their hope justified, and they spread the word about Jesus and what had been announced to them.

They spread the good news, that the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord had been born. And they returned expressing the glory, the praise, the joy and justified, proven, fulfilled hope that Mary, Elizabeth, and the unborn John had already displayed.

So we see these expressions of joy and hope amongst seemingly everyone in their reaction to the annunciation. And that begs the question of how do we respond to today?

Is there reason for joy and hope today because of the Annunciation?

Well one of the best responses to this question actually comes from Mary herself. She actually composed a song or poem about this, which reads much like the psalms of the Old Testament. It beautifully communicates why the birth of Jesus is good news in general, not just for herself.

Luke: 1:48b-55

From now on all generations will call me blessed, **49** for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. **50** His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. **51** He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. **52** He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. **53** He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. **54** He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful **55** to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”

So we've seen that to the figures in Luke's narrative, The birth of Jesus is good news, it is reason for Joy for all people, it is a testament to God's faithfulness to his promises, to his care for us, but now we also see it is a testament to God's mercy over the course of generations, God's power, particularly over the powerful, and his uplifting of the humble and hungry over the the rulers and the rich, his faithfulness to not just recent individual promises, but to promises made thousands of years ago. This annunciation is joyful news, it is hopeful news, for all people, for all time.

If the birth of Jesus was a sign of God's mercy from generation to generation then, it still is now. If God was faithful to his promises 2000 years ago, why would he not be faithful now? When Mary talks of how God performs mighty deeds, scattering those who are proud, bringing down rulers, lifting up the humble, filling the hungry, sending the rich away, those aren't just past or present notions she had 2000 years ago. Those are eternal characteristics of God, that she sees manifested and epitomized in the life she is bearing. Those are truths that are just as real today. So yes,

We can still have joy and hope from the Annunciation today.

What was worth celebrating by Mary, Elizabeth, John, and the Shepherds then, is still worth celebrating now.

But there was another annunciation that's worth mentioning, one that came a few months before Gabriel spoke to Mary. He came to Zechariah, Mary's relative, a temple priest. This is what happened.

Luke 1:11-17

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. **12** When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. **13** But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. **14** He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, **15** for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. **16** He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. **17** And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

So Zechariah received an announcement about the birth of his son John the Baptist, who will go on to pave the way for Jesus. And while Jesus' birth is miraculous, this one is also miraculous, not just because an angel is announcing it, but because Zechariah and Elizabeth are past child-bearing age. They shouldn't be able to have children anymore, but now they can. And their child will be used mightily for God. This seems like plenty of reason for joy, which Gabriel communicates

Luke 1:14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,

But Zechariah's response is not a joyful one.

Luke 1:18 Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

Zechariah doubts, even though there is an angel telling him the impossible will happen and it will be a reason for joy, Zechariah only sees the impossibility of what Gabriel is declaring.

Zechariah doesn't see the impossible made possible by God, he sees an opportunity for disappointment, for false hope, for discouragement.

And you can see why

Luke 1:6

6 Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. 7 But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous and blameless in the sight of God. They were doing everything right. And yet they had been unable to have a child. Children have historically been considered a sign of blessing, including in OT Judaism. If children are a sign of blessing, and Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous and blameless, they should have logically been able to have a child, but they couldn't. And to make matters worse, they were old now, so there was no physical possibility of conception.

Something else worth noting. In Vs: 13, Gabriel says, "your prayer has been heard," That language indicates that Zechariah didn't just have the misfortune of not having a child in spite of him and his wife's righteousness, but that this childlessness was something they had intentionally been praying for without an answer until now.

Zechariah has been so discouraged by doing what's right, living righteously, praying for a child, with no result, that his reaction to Gabriel's announcement of his son John's birth, the reaction to the message that the long wait and prayers have been answered, is disbelief and doubt. "How can I be sure?"

I want to add extra emphasis and explanation to Zechariah's response because I sense that for some of us, we are in a similar place of discouragement and disbelief. We've witnessed what we thought were noble hopes dashed and good dreams evaporate. We've seen our best intended efforts, hard work, resources, sacrifice result in failure or defeat instead of success. We feel like Godly prayers for the Kingdom, for our ministries, our churches, our friends, brothers and sisters in the faith have gone unanswered. And so when we hear from God that there is actually hope for what we thought was impossible, that there is reason for joy approaching, the thought of being optimistic again can seem scary, perhaps even laughable.

I know that from personal experience. In my last ministry assignment back in New Orleans, there was a long season like this. Over the course of 1 weekend, I found out that my boss, best friend, and only co-worker in my ministry for years, the friend I went through Covid and Hurricane Ida with, served alongside everyday, had committed a moral failure and had to be dismissed. I had to become campus pastor just a few days later, and then over the next season help the students process their hurt while trying to

chart a path forward alone and process my own hurt. Then I went through a breakup with my longtime girlfriend, which wasn't related, but still threw more hurt on the pile.

Basically the opposite of what I'd been praying and hoping for, and working towards across different areas of life happened all at once. And even in good seasons, normal life and ministry are full of situations that we might not want but we still have to deal with anyway, so when other normal disappointments naturally popped up in my life, or work the sense of discouragement felt especially defeating, because now it looked like a pattern. It was easy to feel like, well shame on me for being optimistic, I should have known it wouldn't work out anyway. That's just the way things are now.

So for those that might be here feeling the distance or numbness of joy and hope not present, know that I've been in a similar place. I know what it's like to feel unable to receive hope or joy. To hear about hope and joy and feeling like practicing those things would just set me up for disappointment and discouragement again. But because I went through that season, I was able to learn at a deeper level why the idea of Jesus being a source of hope and joy is so important.

Because our circumstances are often challenging and full of pain and sorrow, even if like Zechariah, we are trying our best. If our hope and joy only comes from our efforts and experiences, we will be disappointed and defeated. But through Jesus we can see that God really is the source of our joy and hope. Let's look back at some of the scriptures we've already read to see that.

Luke 1:28c

...The Lord is with you."

Luke 1:32-33

32 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, **33** and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

Luke 1:37

37 For no word from God will ever fail.

Luke 1:50

50 His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation

Luke 2:10-11

...I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. **11** Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

Even in the announcement of Jesus' birth, we can see that the Lord is with us, He is not absent. We can see that Jesus is a king that reigns forever, that he is not just a king for today, but we can have hope in him all of our days. We see that God is true to his word and his promises, throughout time, including now. We don't have to doubt his character. We can see that God is merciful for all time, including merciful to us in our failures now, and that God doesn't play favorites, He wants all people to find hope and joy in him, Including anyone here grappling with doubt, depression, anxiety, defeat, or brokenness of any kind. We have a savior, God has not left us without salvation, He has not left us without hope, including anyone here who is experiencing hopelessness.

We always have reason for finding hope and joy in Jesus, even when our circumstances aren't providing that reason themselves.

I want to finish with one last scripture. Mary wasn't the only one with a song to sing after the Annunciation. Zechariah actually had one himself when John was born.

Luke 1:67-79

67 His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: **68** "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them. **69** He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David **70** (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), **71** salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—**72** to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant **73** the oath he swore to our father Abraham: **74** to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear **75** in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. **76** And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, **77** to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, **78** because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven **79** to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

Zechariah didn't stay hopeless and joyless, he saw God at work, and God restored what was lost. And so as we pray out, it is my hope that God will do the same for someone here this Christmas.