

“What makes your spirit leap?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Micah 5:2-5 and Luke 1:39-55

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Last summer, Jenna and I took Emerson to the Wild Center in Tupper Lake in the Adirondacks. It's a really cool place where you can walk among the treetops, wrestle in a giant spider web, and watch otters play. But the part I loved best was the forest music. It's a nature walk, but it's also an art exhibit, but it's also a concert. All at once. The trail is dotted with sculpture, crafted from welded steel by local artist Barney Bellinger. He takes this cold steel, seemingly so antithetical to the soft greens and browns of the Adirondacks, and bends it until it captures the shapes, forms, and light of the woods, lakes, and mountains. Bellinger says that he has been exploring forests since he was four years old, when his grandfather would take him into the wilderness and teach him about trees. But there's more. As you walk among the trees and art, twenty-four speakers placed discreetly along the trail, surround you with music that blends with the natural sounds of the forest: the wind shushing in the trees, the birds singing, the buzzing of insects. It's a symphony of nature and humanity. The original instrumental composition of Eric Sturr was inspired by the artwork of Bellinger, mixing metallic sounds with the harmonies of marimba and violins.

The result is stunning. My spirit leapt.

It was beautiful—this harmony of nature, art, music, and us, the people who walked those woods.

I love that feeling when everything's in sync—not to be confused, of course, with the 90s boy band. It's that moment when I feel connected to everything around me, like I truly belong.

I think that's what just happened to Mary and Elizabeth in our story from Luke. And I think it's what's meant to happen to us.

Mary has just learned that she's pregnant with Jesus. She has bravely, prophetically, said yes to being the mother of God. Imagine it! Her strength is beyond question. And yet, there must be a cascade within her of so many different feelings: worry, wonder, fear. There are people saying she can't do it, she's too young, she's not married, it's a scandal, Joseph should leave her, she's too ordinary, too poor, she can't be the mother of God. Mary's head must be spinning, pulled in all these different directions. She probably doesn't feel in sync at all. I bet Elizabeth doesn't either: she's worried she's too old to have a kid, what are people going to think, how is she going to care for this child, how's the world going to treat her child?

Everything's in pieces.

But then something happens. These two women find each other. And they're standing there, in the presence of God—Christ in Mary, John in Elizabeth, angels above, the Holy Spirit swelling in them. And it all falls away, all the doubt, all the whispers, all the unwanted advice, all the fear. It falls away. And what's left is just them and their truth. They are going to be mothers. They are going to bring into this world a love so bright, so powerful, that it's going to change everything, it's going to save us all. That's them. Mothers of the kin-dom of God. Everything suddenly clicks, and the child that is in Elizabeth—the prophet who announces the presence of God—he leaps for joy, Luke says. And as he does so, Mary bursts into song, singing for joy, singing of this new world that is dawning.

The spirit in Elizabeth and Mary leaps, in this moment of startling clarity, in knowing who they are and who God is. And Luke calls that in sync moment “joy.”

That's the word we've been dancing around throughout this sermon. I felt joy in the woods. Joy inspired that art and music. Joy inspired those woods, inspired our very creation. Joy.

Joy isn't just being happy. Joy is being truly, and entirely, yourself—every part of you alive and in alignment and unashamed. Throughout much of life, we look, as Paul once said, through a glass darkly. Our perception is dulled, distorted. We live as only part ourselves. We are pulled in varied directions by the expectations, definitions, and pressures of others and ourselves. We walk in a cloud. But there are moments when that cloud parts, moments when all that falls away, when we are truly ourselves, as God made us. You're riding a horse, and suddenly, there's just you and the horse and the wind, and you are one. You're tossing your giggling child in the air, and love overwhelms you, and you would face monsters to protect this child. You're handing a meal to a neighbor at a soup kitchen, and you have this moment of eye contact and smile, and a sense of purpose floods you: like you were meant to be here, with this person.

Joy.

When we asked some of you, during our Holy Conversations one-on-ones, about where you find joy, where you feel most purposeful and alive, you gave us a range of answers. A lot of you talked about creative activities: theater, the arts, music, crocheting and knitting, crafts and woodworking. You talked about nature, hiking, gardening, and animals. You talked about being with family, friends, and children. You talked about hands-on projects and helping others. You talked about reading and traveling and sports. Interestingly, for most people, church or faith was not the first or primary context for joy. A few people named singing in the choir, or church friends, or special services like Easter sunrise. And a few people connected their joy with God. I remember you, Jack, for instance, telling me how when you ride your bike, or work in your yard, or drive your car, or help others, you feel God; these are spiritual acts for you. And I suspect that's what's going on for all of us. All of our joys are spiritual. They are moments when God is present with us—we just may not know it; we may not think of it that way, and as such we may miss out on the fullness and truth of that joy.

Joy isn't supposed to be just a fleeting or insular experience. It's supposed to be revelation, as it was for Mary and Elizabeth—a clarification of who we are, why we are, and who God is.

The child in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy when Jesus enters. John awakens her to the presence of God and the miracle that is unfolding. He awakens her to her own purpose and role in that miracle.

I think John is in all of us, not just Elizabeth. We've all got this alarm inside of us, like those metal detectors you see old guys walking around beaches with, searching for hidden treasure. Every time that spirit in us leaps, it's detecting God. That joy, that leaping, that sounding of the alarm when we experience the rush of purpose and connectivity and identity, it's telling us: hey! God's here! Pay attention!

These are moments when the God in us connects with the God of all—when our spirit connects with the Holy Spirit, when we live into the image of God within us and the purpose of that image.

In art and music, we participate in creation like God. In nature, we experience the interconnectivity of God. With animals, we enter the curiosity and play of God. When we are with others, we experience the relational nature of God. When we help, we enact the love of God.

All those moments of joy—that was God. Walking in the woods? God. Singing a song? God. Riding your bike? God. Reading a book? God. Marching for justice? God. Traveling? God.

There will always be the other stuff of life—the dilutions, the distortions—but when we know what our truth is, our joy, we can choose to build spaces into our days when our joy can sing and leap, when we can meet God. And when we do so, we will be led to create these spaces for others. We will encourage the arts and sports in school. We will foster green spaces in cities. We will celebrate the truth of another's sexuality or gender identity. We will oppose behaviors, biases, and policies that stereotype others based on race, age, or ability. We will create an economy in which all have access to joy. We will connect our church life to our joy life. We will form small groups in our church around shared pockets of joy (which happens to be one of Holy Conversations' recommendations).

So, let me ask you one of life's most important questions, and I encourage you to reflect on this question throughout your week as we approach Christmas: Where do you experience what Elizabeth and Mary did? When does the child in you, your spirit, your truth, leap? What makes your heart sing and magnify the Lord? When do you feel most alive, most yourself?

Whatever makes your spirit leap, whatever gives you true joy, that is God. Go, and give birth to it. **Amen.**