

## Elizabeth & Zechariah - Unexpected Joy

### Naomi Pendle

### Luke 1:39-58

It is a real joy to be here and to be back. Three weeks ago, you were praying for me as I went to South Sudan, and now I have returned. I am deeply grateful.

It is a privilege to speak about joy at Christmas. Over recent weeks of travelling, I have listened to many joyful carols and reflected deeply on joy. Today, I want to speak about how joy is not just an emotion. It is a positive emotion, but the joy found in Jesus - the joy experienced by Mary and Hannah - is something far deeper. It is a gift of the Spirit and a glimpse of God's kingdom and His kingship.

My prayer for us this Christmas is that joy would be more than a passing feeling, but a glimpse of God's kingdom and rule.

I am thankful for your prayers while I was in South Sudan. I continue to work with South Sudanese and Sudanese researchers. It is a very difficult time. In February, the South Sudanese government resumed bombing, and in Sudan there is now full-scale war. I will return to this later.

I am also grateful to Barbara for the birthday cake she made for me, and to Lisa for delivering it. That moment was a genuine joy this week.

Biblical joy is far deeper than a "Disney" version of joy. It is not simply happiness when things go well. Joy in Scripture is:

- Joy for the world
- Joy rooted in faith
- Joy that endures suffering

Luke opens his Gospel not with interviews, but with songs. Mary sings. Zechariah sings. These people, having encountered God, cannot contain their response. Their joy overflows in song.

Songs were also a way of remembering. In oral cultures, truth is carried through music. This is why Luke records these songs word for word.

Mary declares:

“and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.”  
- Luke 1:47

This speaks of intense, almost uncontrollable joy - a joy that leaps and overflows. Elizabeth describes the same joy when John leaps in her womb.

Modern ideas often define joy as life going well. Scripture does not. C.S. Lewis argued strongly against equating joy with happiness. Joy is not dependent on circumstances. It is more like a “memory of a memory” - a glimpse of Eden, a foretaste of something future.

At Christmas, joy can be complicated. Some anticipate it; others fear it due to loss, loneliness, or pressure. But biblical joy is not about the moment being perfect.

The psalmist writes:

“You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”  
- Psalm 16:11

Fullness of joy comes later. For now, joy visits us - briefly - pointing us forward.

Mary’s song echoes the song of Hannah, written over a thousand years earlier. Both women sing of God overturning human expectations.

Hannah declares:

"My heart rejoices in the Lord."  
- 1 Samuel 2:1

Mary echoes:

"My soul glorifies the Lord."  
- Luke 1:46

Hannah warns against pride:

"Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance."  
- 1 Samuel 2:3

Mary proclaims:

"He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts."  
- Luke 1:51

Hannah speaks of reversal - the strong humbled, the weak raised.  
Mary declares the same:

"He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble."  
- Luke 1:52

Both songs announce an upside-down kingdom. Hannah's son would anoint kings. Mary's son would be the King - the Anointed One - born not in a palace, but in a stable.

With Jesus, God's presence would no longer be confined to a temple. Through the Spirit, joy would be available everywhere.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace..."  
- Galatians 5:22

This joy is not postponed until heaven. It is given now.

In the Sudans, circumstances do not suggest joy. Decades of war, famine, and fear dominate daily life. Millions have died. Today, millions face starvation. People sleep outdoors to escape aerial bombardment.

And yet...there is joy.

In protection-of-civilian camps, people plant trees, embroider bedding, and paint their mud walls for Christmas. These acts are small, defiant expressions of hope.

I bought a large container of honey from a disabled man at church. Unsure what to do with it, I gave it to a researcher whose children had been longing for honey for weeks. That small gift became a shared moment of joy.

In the Nuba Mountains, a drone strike recently killed 48 children. War returned to villages and schools. Yet Nadia, a local woman who runs a charity, gathered pumpkins to take to her children so they could taste home at Christmas.

Another woman, Viola, lost her young son to malnutrition last Christmas. This year, she has a new baby - a fragile but real sign of hope.

In South Sudan, one meal a day is normal. Children's bodies cannot survive on this. In one clinic, a child dies every day. And yet mothers continue. They save pennies. They work. They hope.

I do not know what your Christmas will be like. I hope it will be happy. But more than that, I pray it will be full of joy - a joy rooted in God's long history, not just in a single day.

God promised Jesus. God sent Jesus. God is still with us.

And one of His gifts, even now, is joy.