

*A Giant Leap of Faith*

**A sermon preached by**  
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**Text:**  
Luke 1:26-45

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## Luke 1:26-45

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."<sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."<sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God."<sup>38</sup> 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.

<sup>39</sup> In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup> where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup> and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup> And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup> For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."



Odd things have been happening in the family that our Gospel lesson points to this morning. An angel has spoken to Zechariah and told him that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son. This was Elizabeth, the one who everyone said would never have any children; Elizabeth, the outcast in the community because of her inability to conceive a child. And on top of all of that, this couple was too old anyway. How is it possible that they would have a baby?

And Zechariah felt the same way about it all. The same question popped into his head and he put his foot in his mouth. He said something he really shouldn't have. He doubted the angels message, "We can't have a baby!" – and he spent the next nine months not being able to speak. Then, as if this wasn't enough, Elizabeth found out that she truly was pregnant. Impossible! But the proof is obvious and you can't hide that kind of thing for very long although she did try to hide for the first five months.

Weird stuff.

As if *that* wasn't enough, in Elizabeth's sixth month of pregnancy, another angel appeared to Cousin Mary. You remember Mary – that sweet little teenager down in Nazareth. Well, an angel showed up at her door step and told her that she is going to have a baby also. You'd think we'd be used to that sort of thing in this family by now. "Great, a baby!" Almost always good news in any family. But wait, suddenly Mary remembers one tiny problem, "I'm not married! Uh oh!" Never fear says the angel – fagedaboutit – the baby in you was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Like that's going to make it any easier for a teenage girl from Nazareth to explain this pregnancy.

Mary showed up at Elizabeth and Zechariah's door. Elizabeth was six months pregnant, Mary had just found out about her own pregnancy. When Mary entered the house, the baby in Elizabeth's womb – leaped. Elizabeth cried out – now remember, Mary has just arrived and hasn't even had the chance to tell Elizabeth about her baby – no cell phones to call ahead, no Internet to send Email,

no way for Elizabeth to know what's going on – “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?”

This scene I call “The Giant Leap of Faith.” It was a leap on the baby's part – it was a leap on Elizabeth's part.

Medical evidence tells us that an unborn baby can hear while still inside the womb. It's comforting for the child to hear its mother's and father's voices. Babies can be born with a sense of who the caring and nurturing people are in their lives. Music, they tell us, can penetrate the walls of the womb – a baby can hear the sounds and feel the vibrations of music played in the room where the mother is. I know over the past 8 months whenever I'm with my son and daughter-in-law she will inevitably startle and tell us that the baby just heard dad's voice, or some music that he likes, or reacted to a laugh or a loud sound.

In our story, the child within Elizabeth's womb, John they call him, leaped at the sound of Mary's voice. Elizabeth didn't cause the baby to move. She didn't jump up and down and shake the baby awake. The baby did it on his own. No doubt the baby heard Mary's voice and sensed the nurture and caring and love in her tone. In that voice, Elizabeth's baby experienced something spectacular – the presence of the Holy Spirit. And because of that presence, Elizabeth's baby leaped. He knew nothing about Mary or Mary's baby. He was a 6 month old fetus. But he leaped at the sound, he leaped at the presence. A giant leap of faith.

After all the weird stuff that had been happening in this family, what more could happen? Elizabeth felt something happen within her that gave her a clear and confident message. “Your baby is unique,” the message said, “but Mary's baby is your Lord.” God is in your midst, Elizabeth, being carried in the womb of your cousin Mary.

Nowhere do we see or hear doubt in this story. Weird stuff happening – but never a doubt. I think that's the most amazing

piece. Praise and glory come out of the mouth of Elizabeth. Without even knowing everything, Elizabeth announces her faith to the world. “Mary, you are blessed by God. Your child is my Lord.” A giant leap of faith. She knew in her heart what had happened and she proclaimed it to the world.

In 1969, when the astronauts of Apollo 11 landed on the moon and Neil Armstrong made that historic step onto the surface, he knew it was a giant leap. “That's one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind.” (Pardon the less than inclusive pronouns.) I remember, as a 10 year old kid, wondering what was going to happen when he jumped off that ladder. And I suspect most adults wondered the same things. Would he sink? What would he find? Would it be rock or sand or cheese? Anything was possible – we were entering the unknown. Sure, we had scientific guesses and hunches. The whole team of NASA personnel was convinced that it was safe to make that step. But still, there was a sense of faith in it all, wasn't there?

Neil Armstrong had faith. He and the scientists and other astronauts and most of the people watching that giant leap had faith in the science and technology that had gotten us that far, but it was still more than that. It was faith in a God that created us and our world that allowed us to collectively jump off that ladder and step onto the moon's surface that day in July 1969. A step into the unknown. A giant leap of faith.

A few years before Armstrong's giant leap, “Charlie Brown's Christmas” made its way into millions of homes around the world. Since 1965, children of all ages, including me, have been glued to television sets as Charlie and Linus and Lucy and Snoopy and the entire Peanuts gang present their Christmas pageant. Who can forget Linus' solo-spotlighted, recitation of Luke's Christmas story – what Linus calls “the true meaning of Christmas?”

But something struck me as I watched the show again just this week. Charlie set out to buy a Christmas tree and, of course, instead of the silver, shiny, aluminum tree that Lucy sent him to

get, he picked out the most pathetic tree that anyone could possibly imagine. (“A Charlie Brown Tree” has become synonymous with those puny trees that dads notoriously pick off the lot.) What struck me this year was Charlie’s faith. The tree wasn’t important, it was only a symbol. The *potential* of the tree was the important thing in Charlie’s eyes. Because of Linus, Charlie was able to recapture the “true meaning of Christmas” and he knew that whatever tree he found would be perfect. He took a giant leap of faith. “This is a nice tree,” he said, “It’ll be perfect.”

Charlie was able to get past the tinsel and flash of the world and find the perfect-ness of God’s creation in a spindly branch of evergreen amidst a flood of glittery light. He was naive enough, or faithful enough, to recognize the difference between giving and receiving.

Part of our Christmas dilemma today is that we don’t know how to receive. We love to give. It feels so good. But do we love to receive?

Walt Mueller writes of “The Lie of Christmas.” He writes of waiting anxiously as a child for the arrival of the Sears “Wish Book” which he would take and thumb through, quickly passing the clothes and tools and house wares, until he got to the toys. His green marker circled carefully all of those things that he absolutely needed for Christmas. He parents knew that “Green = Walt” and that other colors circled to his brothers’ desires.

He writes, “Just as I remember those excited feelings of pre-Christmas anticipation, I also remember the empty and disappointed emotions I felt in the minutes and days after all the wrapping paper had been ripped off and thrown away. Don’t get me wrong – I was happy – but only for awhile. Some of the stuff under the tree just didn’t look or work like it had in the Sears Catalog or on the television commercial. Other gifts broke. And it wasn’t long before the novelty wore off and

everything wound up in the back of my closet or bottom of my toy box. I had believed, in my childhood naiveté, that all that stuff under the tree would somehow make me feel better, make me happy, and make me complete. It was nothing but a lie. But stupid me. . . each and every year it was the same thing as my yearning for completeness, peace, and satisfaction led me to buy into the great ‘lie of Christmas’ one more time.”

Even as adults we’re tempted back into that “lie of Christmas” telling us that we can find happiness in getting and giving stuff. There is stuff that I simply must have in order to be happy. The malls wave us in; the electronics stores call out; the clothing boutiques whisper to us. The great ‘lie of Christmas’ lives on in today’s culture. We believe we can fill the gnawing hunger with anything and everything but the one right thing. What a lie!”

Have you had the experience of receiving a gift from someone that you really don’t know all that well? And then on top of it all the gift turns out to be pretty nice? What do you do? You try and come up with a gift that you can give in return, not out of gratitude because you really didn’t ask for anything in the first place, or out of friendship because you hardly know the person anyway, but simply because you don’t want to feel guilty having received without having given.

“We don’t want to be indebted,” writes UM Bishop Will Willimon, “the gift seems to lay a claim upon us, especially since it has come from someone we barely know. This is uncomfortable; it’s hard to look the person in the face until we have reciprocated. By giving us a gift, this person has power over us . . . We think of ourselves as basically generous, benevolent, giving people. That’s one reason why everyone, even the nominally religious, loves Christmas. Christmas is a season to celebrate our alleged generosity.”

But Luke's Christmas story isn't about our giving, it's about our ability to receive. He reminds us that Elizabeth received Mary without any doubt. She took her giant leap of faith based on what she received from Mary's presence not based on what she was giving to Mary – advice or compassion or food or something out of the Sears Christmas Wish Book. Elizabeth's giant leap of faith – and indeed her baby's leap – was in response to what she received. With unparalleled grace she accepted it as a gift.

Willimon goes on: “We prefer to think of ourselves as givers – powerful, competent, self-sufficient, capable people whose goodness motivates us to employ some of our power, competence and gifts to benefit the less fortunate. Which is a direct contradiction of the biblical account of the first Christmas.”

The Christmas story is about receiving, about rejecting the lie of the world, about the power of powerlessness, about the *acceptance* of a gift that is beyond anything that the world can imagine. The gift that God gives and asks us to receive is so strange and unimaginable that the early writers used stories of supernatural events to try and tell us how utterly unbelievable this story is – so *believe* it, they tell us. “No way that happened. Get out! *Really?!?!?*”

God came to be with us, promised to never leave us, promised to return while never having left. It's nearly unbelievable, but it's the gift that God has given us in the form of this baby who visited Elizabeth's doorstep and who she accepted so completely and so definitely. It is this gift that Elizabeth's unborn baby sensed and that caused him to take that giant leap of faith that now is there as an example for us.

French philosopher Blaise Pascal pondered our unwillingness to accept God's gift, our desire to fill our lives with stuff instead of God:

What else does this longing and helplessness proclaim, but that there was once in each person a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the

empty print and trace? We try to fill this in vain with everything around us, seeking in things that are not there the help we cannot find in those that are there. Yet none can change things, because this infinite abyss can only be filled with something that is infinite and unchanging - in other words, by God [himself]. God alone is our true good.

What is it that makes you leap? What would make you take a giant leap of faith during this season? Or for that matter each and every day of your existence? Is there some material gift that will truly fill that void in your life? I doubt it. Is there something that someone can give that you will accept with a grace and an openness that will make a difference for you? Probably not. Is there something that you can give to someone else that will do more than make you feel good about your ability to give? I don't know.

We must each learn how to receive, for God has given. That's what Christmas is all about.

The prophet Isaiah was pleading with King Ahaz to put his trust in God. Instead, Ahaz was relying more on alliances with great military powers like Syria to hold on to his own power. If you don't believe in God's promises, Isaiah warned, you will no longer be strong. As a sign of God's promise, a baby would arrive. “Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel.” (Isaiah 7:14). That's the context for this text that we take as a part of our Christmas story. This fearful King Ahaz wanted strength and power and protection. God would send a baby. Ahaz would rather have had armies since Assyria was breathing down his neck. God sent a baby as a sign.

“This is often the way God loves us:” Willimon writes, “with gifts we thought we didn't need, which transform us into people we don't necessarily want to be.” This stranger comes to us, this God who we don't even really know all that well, and gives us a gift

that we didn't even really ask for – this God calls on us to be receivers, not givers.

Can we open ourselves to receive this Christmas? Receive what God places in front of us? Can we receive that gift that God revealed to us in the form of an unprotected infant, first in the womb of a teenage girl then in the hay of a dirty stable out back of some overbooked inn? Can we receive with faith like Elizabeth did and can we leap with her baby at the presence of this great gift?

Shortly after Blaise Pascal died, someone found a piece of paper sewn into the lining of his jacket. Pascal had placed it there as a constant reminder of what the "truth of Christmas" had meant to him when he first believed and experienced it. On the paper were recorded the words he had written when his life was first filled by the baby Jesus: "From about half past ten in the evening to about half an hour after midnight. Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob. Not the God of philosophers and scholars. Absolute Certainty. Beyond reasons. Joy. Peace. Forgetfulness of the world and everything but God. The world has not known thee, but I have known thee. Joy! Joy! Joy! Tears of Joy!"

Blaise Pascal, one of the world's renowned mathematicians took a giant leap of faith based not on his faith in answers proven by formulas but by a faith that convinced him that God's gift to us is one of emotion and fulfillment. We can be filled with God's gift if only we are ready to receive.

Leap with Mary. Leap with Elizabeth. Leap with the baby John. Leap with God and because of God and in the presence of God and receive God's great gift to you.

Receive. Receive. Receive. "Joy! Joy! Joy! Tears of Joy!"

Amen.