

A CELEBRATION**Isaiah 9:1-7; Luke 1:26-56**

INTRO: Fiona has some favorite songs. She can do a mean “Stop! In the Name of Love!” and she does a perfect wolf howl like Sam the Sham and the Pharaohs did in “Little Red Riding Hood”. But one of the oldies but goodies she sang first is still a favorite and sometimes she still breaks out with “*There’s a party goin’ on right here.*” as she belts out the first stanza of *Celebration!* by Kool & the Gang. The song is an exuberant party song from 1980:

*There's a party goin' on right here
A celebration to last throughout the years
So bring your good times, and your laughter too
We gonna celebrate your party with you
Come on now
Celebration
Let's all celebrate and have a good time
Celebration
We gonna celebrate and have a good time*

It’s become a stock number for wedding receptions, so most of you have probably heard it. It came at a dark time in our history though and in a way it was just in time delivery for a tired nation.

As a country we had just completed a difficult decade that began with a spiraling quagmire of war in Vietnam that ended miserably with nothing anywhere near victory. In fact, it was quite the opposite since Saigon fell into communist hands in 1975.

We also saw a horrific scandal in Washington that ended with the first and only resignation of a president. Now that I think about it, his vice president resigned too, but for different reasons. It was a sad time indeed.

In 1973 we struggled through deep recession and the oil embargo that sent us into an oil crisis that only worsened as the decade progressed. Remember gasoline rationing in 1979?

In 1978 Jim Jones, a former Church of the Nazarene pastor, who formed a cult named the Peoples Temple, led about 900 of his followers in a mass suicide in Guyana where they had fled to escape authorities in the USA. The decade ended with the Iran Hostage Crisis which began in November of 1979. This was when 52 diplomats and U.S. citizens were taken hostage in the US Embassy in Tehran and held for 444 days until January of 1981. The country needed to celebrate something, and Kool & the Gang hit it big with a happy song called *Celebration*. And even though it’s a happy and, surprisingly wholesome, song, celebrating can come up pretty empty without Jesus.

Last week we talked about a promise fulfilled, this week, as we continue through Advent, we’re looking at a celebration. Christmas is a lasting and happy celebration even for people who don’t know the true meaning of it. This is because of the fact that, at it’s very foundation, it’s about Jesus. Jesus is the source of Joy to the World and for that reason this holiday is profound and extensive. So let’s go back to the beginning and look at the celebration that happened as word came of a coming Messiah.

(Read Luke 1:26-56 – not on the wall – too long)

Mary celebrates in this passage because . . .

God passed over earthly greatness to include a peasant girl to carry his plan to fruition.

- He didn’t go to Jerusalem – he went to Nazareth to unveil his plan. Jerusalem was THE destination. It was a holy city and it was where any good Jew wanted to go and they certainly attempted to make a pilgrimage there at least once a year. Instead God chose Nazareth, which, by the way was not a Podunk backwater. It was a major crossroad from the coast to Galilee and also points south and there were lots of foreigners there. That’s why Nathaniel, when he met Jesus for the first time, asked, “*Can anything good come from Nazareth?*” John 1:46. It was considered “Sin City” and anyone who thought about the Messiah finally arriving, expected him to come from a holy place like Jerusalem. God chose Nazareth instead.
- In the same way, God didn’t use the Temple in the Holy City, he used a stable in Bethlehem. And let me tell you, Nazareth may have been a bustling city right on the main thoroughfare, but Bethlehem, definitely was a Podunk backwater. Yes, it was King David’s home town, but it had nevertheless slid into obscurity. But God chose Bethlehem.

- God didn't use military might, he used a baby in a manger. He could have used charismatic leader to rally the populous, but instead, the Messiah came as a baby whose first bed was a cattle trough.
- So, it stands to reason that he came a young peasant woman, probably in her teens, to be the mother of that Baby Messiah. He chose a humble and willing girl over a high society lady. That's why Mary turned from her encounter with the Angel of the Lord and celebrated her calling with soaring words.
- For some people this choice of a virgin has caused issues for some people. And it begs the question . . .

How big is your God?

- Some scholars, and many commentators feel the need to explain how the Virgin Birth happened and/or whether or not it is even necessary. Some question whether it happened at all. They also seem compelled to explain how God could have orchestrated a star to guide the Magi to come and find the Christ Child.
- Here's the point I want to make: God is not limited by the ordinary or the extraordinary. He created all there is and he can do what he wants with it. If God is all powerful, can he not do anything he wants? And since two of the four Gospels include the Virgin Birth then there was a Virgin Birth. Either you believe the Bible or you don't.
- God can act as he wills as long as it is in keeping with his divine nature. So, how big is your God? If he's a God capable of all the Bible says he is, and he is, by the way, that's a lot to celebrate.
- And then. . .

We can celebrate a wonderful story of love and faith

- Look at the Christmas story in Matthew and Luke and how Mary and Joseph responded to God's call on their lives.
- Mary was engaged to Joseph – we've heard this since were knee high to grasshoppers. Engagement in that culture had the same legal force of marriage and was for about a year. God's plan certainly put a crimp in Mary's plan. In fact it turned her life upside down and sent her reputation down the drain. But she had monumental faith in the One who was calling her and her answer is as powerful as it is simple, . . . *"I am the Lord's servant, . . . may your word to me be fulfilled."* Luke 1:38 (NIV). Now that's faith!
- And Joseph took Mary to be his wife despite what the neighbors the people in the synagogue would think. But he went through a learning curve. Let me explain by reading from Matthew 1:18-25. Todd read this last week, but listen again, *This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."* All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: *"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").* When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. Matthew 1:18-25. First, notice the faith here. Joseph was a man of God and he wanted to follow what he knew scripture and the teaching of the law required. THAT'S FAITH! BUT, he loved Mary too much to expose her to disgrace. THAT'S LOVE!!! In the end, I believe Joseph was relieved to get the word from God that he was to take Mary as his wife. He would gladly put up with the aspersions of others to marry the love of his life, and assist with the plan of salvation for all humanity. That's a celebration!
- Let's quickly look at the passage Emily read from Isaiah because I want to show how . . .

The Zeal of the Lord is reason for celebration

- Verse 1 says *there will be no more gloom for those who WERE in distress.* This is because a deliverer is coming! The Messiah is light in the darkness.
- It's like this: Last week Kathy and I strung lights on our front porch. We've done this at every Christmas since we moved here, but this year we used different lights. For the past 14 Christmases we used rope lights. We liked them, but they could be temperamental. You'd get them all strung, and back in the middle

somewhere a section would go out and you'd have remove that section and replace it. It was time for something new. So we strung it with new LED lights which are brighter. We also decided to not only wrap the top but also down each of the eight posts of the porch. In the end we used about 200 hundred linear miles of lights totaling about 985 thousand lightbulbs. The result was that I thought the front of the house might actually melt off, and at least one of my daughters called me Clark Griswald. You see, the effect of those gajillions of lightbulbs is almost blinding. You almost need sunglasses.

- Where there was darkness there is now bright and exuberant light. This is how I picture humanity before and after the coming of Messiah. You see, prior to the angel's call to Mary there had been 400 years of silence for the people of God. And prior to that, including when Isaiah was a prophet to God's people, there had been seemingly endless darkness. No more! *The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.* Isaiah 9:2. This is a celebration if I ever saw one! To be in gloom. To stumble in darkness and then to be enlightened – that's reason for a party.
- And how does that passage end? *The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this!* Isaiah 9:7. That word "zeal" is a picturesque word that provides a visual of the flame under a pot bringing the contents of the pot to a wild boil. That's what God's love is like for his creation. It's boiling over with his passion to save. Talk about something to celebrate! He could have left us in darkness, but he sent his Son instead.
- And, finally, back to Mary's encounter with the angel when the angel says . . .

Nothing is too difficult for the Lord

- Well, that's what a lot of translations say. What I read to you from the NIV was, *For no word from God will ever fail.* Luke 1:37. This is in response to Mary questioning how she can become pregnant when she has not ever had sexual relations with a man. The angel responds that the Holy Spirit would overshadow her and she would become pregnant. In fact her elderly cousin Elizabeth who was past child bearing age, was and now was six months pregnant. Nothing is too difficult for God. It brings up that question again, how big is your God, Mary?
- Mary's response is the celebratory song we have in Luke 1:45-55. We won't cover that song because this is getting long. But let me say it put's Kool and the Gang to shame. Not because the guys didn't try, but because Mary is singing Gospel truth that is Good News of Great Joy for all Humanity. And she doesn't leave any stone unturned. Read it again when you get a chance, maybe in your devotions this week. Notice how Mary celebrates what God has done in the past, and then how she celebrates what God was doing in the present, and then, with great anticipation, Mary celebrates what God will do in the future. That's a celebration.

Conclusion: This is why Christmas is a most wonderful time of the year. It's because something really happened. It's not a North Pole fairytale or a conjured feel good story. This happened. Jesus came to humanity and the plan of salvation was unfolding. That's why it's a celebration. Amen.