



A LEAP IN FOUR DIRECTIONS

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Two weeks from today. Fourteen more shopping days are all that's left before Christmas. If it were only 12 days, I'd ask you to sing the "12 Days of Christmas" song with me, but it's not. And I understand those days actually come AFTER Christmas, anyway. So I guess you're off the hook.

I've always thought that was a strange gift list in the song...a partridge in a pear tree I could maybe understand, and the five golden rings are nice, but what's with the ten lords a-leaping? That's just bizarre. Who would want a singing telegram that's just a bunch of people jumping around? "So what did you get this year?" "I got a plasma TV. What about you?" "Oh, I got ten lords a-leaping. Again." You couldn't even regift that one.

The leapers in that song date back to seventeenth century Europe, where that song was first written. We'll never really know how they became part of the Christmas tradition. But did you know there's a Christmas story of a leaper far earlier than that? Luke gives us the details in an event just months before Jesus was born. It was just a single leap, but it was a good one.

At this point in the story, Mary has just been told by the angel that she's going to have Jesus. At the end of the announcement, the angel says, "Oh by the way – even your old cousin Elizabeth is expecting. Nothing is impossible with God."

Mary gets that piece of news and knows that Elizabeth will be the one person in the world who can relate to her situation. So she packs up her things and heads out of town for a visit.

Luke 1:39-45

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"

Do you remember rice candy? I used to love this stuff when I was a kid – mostly for the one special feature. When you took off the outer plastic wrapper, there was another opaque wrapper inside THAT YOU COULD EAT!! How cool is it to be able to eat paper? In fact you pretty much had to eat it, because if you tried to peel it off, you would end up completely frustrated. It was stuck to the candy for good.

Of course, it tasted a little like paper at first too, but that would quickly melt away and inside was this sweet chewy treat. It felt like you were getting to a real prize when the candy flavor started to come through.

I think of this story out of Luke as being like rice candy. It's a sweet little treat of a story that takes some extra work to unpack. It's not easy to know what to make of it on the surface. You might not even pay that much attention to it. But as you chew on it a bit, any initial frustration or confusion melts away and you have this little morsel of truth that is full of flavor.

The whole incident is worth reading, because it captures the excitement and anticipation of Jesus being born. In the past when I've looked at this story, I've focused on the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth. Elizabeth gave Mary such a gracious reception. We can learn a lot from her response. But as I looked at the story this time, I kept coming back to that leaping baby. Something about that image is very compelling.

It would be easy to just chalk up the baby's movement to coincidence, or to say that Luke is using his imagination to describe what the baby did. But right after it happens, Elizabeth comments on it. She interprets it for Mary and for us. And she tells us that the baby had leaped for joy. It wasn't the usual kick or elbow poking her in the stomach. She knew this was different. She knew why the baby did what he did.

By including Elizabeth's words, Luke is intentionally drawing our attention to this very small act by a very small person. But why? I sat and thought about that for a long time. It seems to me that there is something almost primal going on here, something so pure and true that a baby can convey it without using any words. This is a message boiled down to the bedrock, where only what is essential remains. The message is that Jesus and joy go together.

I don't mean to make more of this incident that is really there, but I don't think it's by accident that God chose a baby as the vehicle to communicate a concept of joy. Because a baby naturally draws out the joy in people. Watch a roomful of crabby, distracted adults when a newborn is brought in the room. Their faces transform as they ooh and aah and generally make themselves look silly talking to the baby. It's just what happens. Babies tap into some of the truest type of joy we can experience.

Beyond that, though, this isn't any ordinary child that Elizabeth is carrying. As we said earlier, John himself was a bit of a miracle baby. An angel had announced his birth, too. Here's what the angel told John's father, Zechariah about the boy he would have:

Luke 1:13-15

Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John...and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb.

When the baby leaped, it was proof of what the angel had predicted. John was in touch with the Holy Spirit even before he was born. God was speaking to him.

John was given one mission in life, and that was to get the people ready for Jesus to arrive. Here's more of what the angel said about him to Zechariah:

Luke 1:17

And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous -- to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

We normally think about his adult ministry as when he fulfilled that prophecy. He preached out in the desert and thousands of people got their act together because of what he said. He prepared the way for Jesus with a message of repentance.

But I think he was already doing the work of preparing people for Jesus when he was in the womb. His jump got his mother's attention. His joy was contagious, and it triggered Elizabeth's sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. She was moved by what her baby did. It laid the groundwork for her to be excited about Mary's news. Even as a baby, John was preparing the way for Jesus to come into Elizabeth's life.

There's an old quote that says, "Preach the gospel always; when necessary, use words." Words weren't necessary here. Sometimes joy is expressed better without words. And joy is a key component of the gospel message.

An unborn baby is pretty limited in how it can communicate. If you're going to choose a baby to deliver a message, you have to have a message that comes through loud and clear. How significant is it that when God moved baby John to communicate something to his mother, the message he chose was that Jesus means joy.

Last week we talked about the sacrifice Christ made in coming to earth and dying on the cross. That is no doubt central to what Jesus came for. But it was a means to an end, and joy was on the far side of it.

The poet Louise Bogan once wrote, "I cannot believe that the...universe turns on an axis of suffering; surely the strange beauty of the world must somewhere rest on pure joy!"

She was on to something there. Christ paid a tremendous cost that we can't ignore or downplay. That's why he came. But he paid it with the hope of something beyond it. That something was joy.

Hebrews 12:2

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross...

Jesus was motivated to do what he did by joy. Remember what the angel told the shepherds? “I bring you good news of great joy.” The word there for good news is the same one we use for the gospel itself. So you could translate the angels words as, “I bring you the gospel of great joy.”

The gospel of great joy. That’s at the heartbeat of Christianity. Sometimes we make the good news sound more like bad news. A relationship with Jesus is reduced to a list of “Thou shalt not’s”. We emphasize how wrong people are and how much they need to change. True as that might be, it isn’t the core of the gospel.

That’s why I’m glad Luke includes this little paragraph about a leaping baby. It pulls us back to the starting point and reminds us that Jesus came to bring joy.

You hear that word a lot at Christmas time. We’re saturated with it through ornaments and cards and songs. Joy to the world has become almost a meaningless phrase, like peace on earth. It’s a nice sentiment, but more like wishful thinking than anything based in reality.

Sometimes we think we have to work hard to whip up the joy ourselves. In the movie Elf, Buddy the elf’s favorite line is, “The best way to spread Christmas cheer is singing loud for all to hear.” And we can sometimes put this pressure on ourselves to try to feel joy and happiness.

We’ve lost sight of something. The joy of Christmas is not so much an emotion as it is an object. Luke is saying that Christ himself is the source of joy. It’s who he is regardless of what we’re feeling. The question is: In what way? If we’re saying the manger held someone with so much power to influence us, what do we mean by that?

There are at least four ways in which Christ’s birth would become a cause of joy for the world. That’s why I call John’s leap a leap in four directions. I was informed by one of my children that it’s physically impossible to have one jump go so many different ways, but indulge me a little. When the angel told the shepherds he had good news, he said it was of GREAT joy, or EXCEEDING joy or EXCESSIVE, OVER THE TOP joy. I like it that the word in Greek is where we get our word “mega.” This was MEGA joy. That tells me it means joy in as many directions as we want to look for it. It’s all over the place. But four ways in particular stand out.

First is what I would call the

Joy of fulfillment.

There is a certain type of joy that comes from doing something you know you were built to do. I have one friend who is an outstanding artist. He works at my old ad agency as a graphic designer, and he's very good at what he does. But he's happiest when he has a pencil and sketchbook in his hand, because he absolutely loves to draw. Now you would think that after spending every day designing ads and brochures and web sites, you might not feel like going home and working on your own artwork. But he can't help it. He just loves it.

And he spends hours and hours creating drawings like this one of Treebeard from Lord of the Rings – not because anyone is going to buy it, but just because it gives him a tremendous amount of joy.

Stop for a minute and think. What is it for you that gives you that kind of joy? Whether it is writing, or working on a car or baking or playing guitar or going for a run, we all have those activities that are completely fulfilling to us.

When baby John the Baptist took that leap, he was experiencing the joy of fulfillment. As I read earlier, he had been given a purpose in life that was very specific, and this was his first chance to act on it. He was living out what he was meant to do, which is incredibly rewarding.

Christ came to allow each of us to experience the same type of fulfillment – not in a hobby or job, but in something much deeper and eternal.

Isaiah 43:6-7

*Bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the ends of the earth —
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.*

We have a built in purpose. God said he created us for his glory. Back in the 1640's, English and Scottish scholars came up with a series of questions and answers to help new Christians understand the most important truths of the faith. Their list is called the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and the very first question they ask is this:

Q. What is the chief end of man?

A. To glorify God and enjoy him forever.

It was such an insightful way to word it. Our main purpose is to bring glory to God. That's what we're wired for. And in the process of doing it, we find fulfillment and joy. We enjoy him forever.

Ephesians 2:10

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Apart from Christ coming, we couldn't live out what we were designed to do. Something was fundamentally broken in our connection with God, to the point where we could never find that fulfillment and joy.

2 Corinthians 5:19-20

God put the world square with himself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins. God has given us the task of telling everyone what he is doing. We're Christ's representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them. We're speaking for Christ himself now: Become friends with God; he's already a friend with you.

What an awesome thing that God has a place for us in his work. We have such small dreams for ourselves. Even our wildest ambitions don't come close to the potential God has in mind for us. We stumble along through our lives settling for way less than fulfillment, and the whole time Christ is right there offering us a way to find that level of joy we can't get doing anything other than what we were created for.

C.S. Lewis once wrote: *We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us... We are far too easily pleased.*

God has prepared something tailor made for us, and it is more fulfilling than anything we could imagine.

A second kind of joy Jesus brings is the **joy of relationship**. It was the sound of Mary's voice that caused John to jump and Elizabeth to shout. It wasn't joy in a vacuum – it was joy in response to another person. The reaction came in the context of relationship.

True friendship gives a joy like nothing else. It isn't just the fun you have with the other person – it's knowing that they want to be your friend. It is a gift to have someone who understands who you really are inside and still loves you.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "The glory of friendship is...the spiritual inspiration that comes to one when he discovers that someone else believes in him and is willing to trust him."

We are social people. Why has the whole "My Space" phenomenon taken off? People want connections to other people. When Adam was in the Garden of Eden, one of the first things God said was, "It is not good for man to be alone." We're better off in relationship.

In that way, we reflect God. There is relationship within God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. It is built in to who God is, and he created us to be the same way.

Sometimes we talk as if Jesus came to earth to fix an accounting problem. The books weren't balanced, so he transferred some spiritual currency from his account pay off our sin debt. It's as if it were just one big transaction.

But it was more than a bookkeeping issue that brought Jesus to earth. Jesus came to invite us into the joy of relationship with him.

John 15:15-16

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

It's great to know Jesus paid the price for us. How much better to know that he did it because he wants us as his friends. He more than anyone understands who we really are, and he still loves us.

Along with that comes the joy of relationships with the rest of Christ's followers. As I said, God knows we are better off together. That's why Psalm 68 says,

Psalm 68:6

God sets the lonely in families.

In a world where everything pulls people away from each other, Christ unites people. I've had so many calls from people who are part of our small groups. They will be on their way home from one of their meetings, and they'll say something like, "I just had to call and tell you how amazing our group was tonight." Times of great prayer and sharing – not just one time or in one group, but over and over. It's not something unique to New Day – that's just the kind of joy that is only found in Christian relationships. It's a taste of heaven here on earth.

So Christ gives us joy by helping us find fulfillment. He gives us joy by calling us his friends and by placing us in relationship with one another. He also came to bring us the

Joy of discovery

This kind of joy is best illustrated by the shepherds we've been talking about.

Luke 2:15-18

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."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

Professor Stephen Hawking is the brilliant physicist who is completely immobilized in a wheelchair. He has to use a voice synthesizer to talk. He has been unable to share in most of the joys in life that we take for granted. But he knows more about the joy of discovery than most of us ever will. He once told an audience, "There is nothing like the Eureka moment of discovering something that no one knew before."

In essence, that's what the shepherds got to do. They discovered the baby Jesus before anyone else.

The shepherds have such a great response when they hear the angel. "Let's go see this thing." They embark on a pursuit of truth. They want to know it for themselves. And they discover that everything is exactly how God said it would be.

In other words, they discovered how faithful God is to his word. And they got to see how unexpected God's answers can be to our problems. They found a baby that was the salvation of the world. It was a Eureka moment that changed their understanding of the universe. They HAD to tell other people.

We have that same opportunity to discover truth with God. It is such a joy to experience his faithfulness and his unexpected answers. Because we have his Spirit right here with us. Jesus said,

John 16:13

But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.

That has been one of my biggest joys in preaching every week. I don't claim to be the world's greatest speaker. I have no illusions about my own style. I'm sure I've preached more than my share of clunkers where you've gone home scratching your head. And I take all the blame for the delivery. But that doesn't change the fact that in preaching over 200 sermons, I have yet to face a week where God didn't reveal some truth to me that I was excited to share about on Sunday. I have yet to face a week where the joy of discovery wasn't there. That's God's faithfulness. Because of Christ, we now have the Spirit of God, who brings us the joy of discovery.

Finally, there is also the

Joy of recovery

The angel told Zechariah that his son John would bring many people back to the Lord. That's the joy of recovery. Jesus meant salvation from sin and death, the biggest cause for joy. Being rescued from the brink of destruction is a huge cause for celebration.

Remember that movie from the 80's called The Mission? I know I've referred to it before, but it's the perfect illustration here, so indulge me. Robert De Niro plays a mercenary and slave trader in South America in the 1700s named Mendoza. He has

killed, captured and sold countless people from the Guadani tribe. Mendoza's a cold hearted killer. Until one day he goes so far as to kill his own brother, and the weight of all his own guilt comes crashing down on him.

He goes to seek the advice of a priest, who tells him to choose his own penance. Mendoza decides he wants to trek through the jungle, to go face the Guadani people and pay for his crimes. But he chooses to do it with all his armor and weapons of war tied in a huge pack that he drags behind him.

The weight is impossible. Toward the end of the journey, he has to scale a cliff with this rope behind him, hundreds of pounds pulling him down. He keeps slipping and can't reach the top. Meanwhile, the Guadani people have arrived and are watching. Suddenly one of them runs over with a knife. Mendoza is sure he's a dead man, but instead the Guadani warrior cuts off the burden and it crashes down into the river. Mendoza is free.

Then De Niro gives the performance of a lifetime as his face shows the relief of having that burden gone. He has been freed, and you can see the joy that only comes when you know you were at the end of your resources and you've been given a second chance. It's the joy of recovery.

Christ is that warrior with the knife. He has every right to end our existence, and instead he chooses to cut the burden away and give us a new shot at life. The weight of sin threatens to pull us to our destruction and Christ offers us a way out. When we realize what he's done for us, how he has rescued us, that's a joy unlike any other.

But there's a second side to the joy of recovery, one we don't think about as often. Karin flew out last week to be with her mom as she was recovering from surgery. While she was there, Karin found some old family photos that she wanted to secretly bring home for a surprise she was working on for her parents. So she slipped them into a book she had brought with her.

On the plane ride home, she read the book for a while, then stuck it in the pocket of the seat in front of her. In the rush to get off the plane, she forgot her book, and didn't know it until she got home.

She was sick about it. These were one of a kind prints. There were no negatives for the pictures – they were irreplaceable. Not only was her surprise ruined, but she was also going to have to break the news to her parents that their pictures were gone forever.

She tried calling the airlines, but she couldn't get through. She tried emailing and got a generic reply back. She tried following up with them later in the week and hit a dead end.

Then this week, an envelope came in the mail. She didn't get her book back, but all her pictures were there, safe and sound. There was a note from a man named Eric who

worked the graveyard shift at Alaska Airlines. He had found them and thought she'd probably like to have them back.

Karin was elated. She thought those pictures were lost forever. There were no words to describe the feeling. Except joy.

In the grand scheme of things, pictures are nothing. But they highlight the fact that joy is not just for who or what is recovered; it's for the person doing the recovering.

We've been talking about the joy Christmas brings to us, but ultimately, it's about God the Father's joy. Jesus told so many stories about God's joy when he gets us back: The woman who found her lost coin. The father of the prodigal son. The shepherd who went after the sheep. In fact, that story says it best:

Luke 15:4-7

"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'

Then Jesus drives it home:

"I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

Christmas joy is God's as much as it is ours. Isaiah tells us he sings over us. He rejoices over our recovery. He leaps right along with John to share with us this good news of great joy.

We began the morning with that strange list of gifts from the 12 days of Christmas. I want to end by asking what you'd like on your list. What leap of joy do you need?

Ask yourself: Have I been settling for less than real joy?

What has been blocking my joy?

I know there are many of you who are suffering. Maybe it has shut you down. Linda Kondracki, who works with hurting children, often says that when kids are traumatized, they try to shut out the pain. But as they shut themselves off from the bad, they shut themselves off from the good as well. Maybe there is a wound so deep it has left you numb to joy. Is there a sorrow you can bring to God? Maybe recovery for you is recovery of your life and you need the ability to even feel joy of any kind.

What joy have I experienced this year?

When we were expecting Isaac, I wrote a song that I would sing to him in Karin's stomach, hoping he would learn the sound of my voice. I took the words from Isaiah 43, which were God's words speaking to his people.

I said a few minutes ago that Christmas joy is God the Father's joy, and that he sings over us. I'd like us to try to take that in and feel it. So for just a moment, I'm going to ask you to close your eyes. Derek's going to come help me out here. As you listen, I want to sing this little song from Isaiah, and I'd like you to hear it as if God is singing it to you. I'm sure my voice doesn't sound like God's, but they are his words. So close your eyes and hear in your heart the joy of your Father in heaven that you are his.