

Text: [Luke 1:5-15a](#)
Date: December 1, 2019 – 1st Sunday of Advent
Title: Bethlehem Blockbusters 1:
“Elizabeth, Zechariah & *Elf*: on Joy and Fear”
Theme: We can’t allow our me-based fears to become obstacles to God-based joy.

Intro

I’m looking forward to our Advent series
You’ve probably figured out by now we’re looking at some Christmas movies
And everybody loves Christmas movies, right?

Even though, let’s be honest, most Christmas movies don’t have a lot to do with Jesus
Many of them have more in common with the gospel message than you might think

Today, we’re talking about joy – and fear – and one of my favorite Christmas movies: *Elf*

1

Joy and fear are both central themes of the Christmas stories
The promises God makes through the birth of Jesus are amazing
But the promises are made real through individuals
And we forget that when God comes face-to-face with people, disrupting their lives, like what we see in the stories of Mary and Joseph, with Elizabeth and Zechariah, we can’t help but be afraid

Joy and fear always travel together
If you’re a parent, think about the day your child was born – or better yet, the day you brought them home from the hospital

Do you remember?
You are so happy, but also so scared
Will I know what to do?
Will I be able to keep them safe?
Will I be a good parent?

You can think about other days too – the questions in your mind –
On the day you got married
Or your first day at a new job, or after you got a big promotion
Or really, any time you've tried something new and unfamiliar
You're anticipating that new opportunity with joy, but you've also got a
certain level of fear and insecurity

2

This week's movie, *Elf*, speaks to that
If you're not familiar with *Elf*, the plot is pretty simple
As a baby, Will Ferrell crawled into Santa's bag when he was making a
delivery to an orphanage
An elf adopts him, and he grows up at the North Pole
As you might expect, he doesn't fit in all that well – both figuratively and
literally! – he's WAY too big
(Which begs the question, why do people and reindeer who are different
always seem to get shunned at the North Pole?)

Buddy sets out on an adventure to find his father in New York – and finds
out he doesn't fit all that well THERE either
After a disappointing first meeting with his Dad, he ends up at Gimbel's
Department Store, where he meets and begins to fall for Jovie

Here's their first meeting:

[CLIP: Jovie & Buddy meet, Buddy talks to her about singing]

The irony is, Jovie sings beautifully, but she's afraid of singing IN FRONT
of people

Almost every character in the movie has to face some fear in order to find
JOY

Jovie has to overcome her fear of singing out loud (and relationships!)

Walter – Buddy's Dad – has to overcome his fear of failure to find out what
a real life looks like beyond his high-pressure job

And Buddy provides the model for all of them, because he just puts himself out there, no matter what the cost or the risk of getting hurt
Buddy has pushed through the fear to get to a place of pure JOY
Where he offers everything he is, and everything he has, without reserve, to the people in his life

3

The early chapters of Luke are the story of two babies: Jesus and John the Baptist

Elizabeth and Zechariah, John the Baptist's parents, are two servants of God who have been blessed with faith and piety – but no children
They are getting older, and have both accepted that it's just not something that's going to happen for them

Zechariah, a priest, is performing his twice-yearly rotation in the Temple in Jerusalem

When he is chosen for a once-in-a-lifetime duty: to burn the incense on the altar in the Holy Place

It was a special honor because it put you just outside the Holy of Holies, and you were chosen by lot for this responsibility

According to tradition, you were not permitted to do it a second time until everyone in your rotation had done it once – and there were a lot of priests

When Zechariah has his vision of the angel Gabriel, he is serving in this special role

And like everyone else in the Bible who meets an angel, he is at first overcome with fear

And just like in every other story of an angel, Gabriel's first words to Zechariah are: "Don't be afraid"

It's not just the appearance of the angel that's unsettling

It's also the message:

This isn't just any child

John will belong to the Lord

"He will be great in the Lord's eyes, and full of the Holy Spirit even from birth"

We can only guess what Zechariah might have been thinking:
at our age, are we up for this?
And what does it even mean to raise up a child for the Lord?

In fact, he says as much to Gabriel a few verses later
And Gabriel is so offended by Zechariah's lack of faith that he renders
Zechariah unable to speak until the promise is fulfilled
So that his silence, rather than his words, become his testimony to what
God has promised

4

Fear is our default position when it comes to doing something new
Even when it's something we WANT to do
When I reflect on all the examples in my own life of fear holding me back,
they all really have the same thought in common:
"What if I screw this up?"

What if I make a mistake and people laugh at me?
What if I'm not as good as I think I am and I fail?
What if I let my kids/my spouse/my family down?

That's where our minds go
Do you notice who is missing from all of these questions? GOD
They're all about me, me, me
If God were in these questions, would any of these even BE questions?
Of course not!

FEAR blocks our path to JOY when we allow OURSELVES – our thoughts,
out insecurities – to become the OBSTACLE
Instead of allowing the power of our FAITH and TRUST in GOD to become
the SPRINGBOARD to help us overcome the obstacle
It often doesn't FEEL like a choice, because what we say is, "I just can't,"
but I'm convinced that it IS a choice

That's what holds Buddy's friend Jovie back from singing
"Singing for people is really no different than singing by yourself," Buddy
says, and he's right
If you can sing, you can sing, no matter who is listening

5

This week, the challenge is simple
And it's really a PRAYER CHALLENGE:

Where are the places in your life where you've allowed FEAR to become
an OBSTACLE in the way of experiencing the JOY God has for you?
Instead, how can your FAITH become the SPRINGBOARD?

It's perfectly natural – even in the biggest moments in our lives – for FEAR
and JOY to travel together
The problem arises when we allow FEAR to prevent us from ever getting to
the JOY

When we can pray FEAR into FAITH,
Focusing on what GOD CAN do rather than what we CAN'T do

We can turn all of our ME-based fears
Into GOD-based JOYS

Amen.

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