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Interrupted by Joy

Preached on the 50th anniversary of the merger between Faith Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church in York, PA

God will make a way when there is no way. Our story today begins with the impossible...it begins with Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, who was a righteous woman and blameless in following God's commandments. But she had been barren for years and years and years. She had endured ridicule and mockery and lived a life of disgrace because she was childless in a culture where a woman's worth depended on her ability to have children. She had almost given up hope, she had almost resigned herself to the impossibility of it all, she had almost exempted herself from God's beautiful story of redemption and salvation. But then, ***God made a way where she thought there was no way.*** She conceived a baby—a baby that would grow up to be a prophet—the one who would baptize the Son of God, who would proclaim “Prepare the way of the Lord” because John knew that God had made a way for him...a way when his father and mother thought there was no way. And then Elizabeth is greeted by her relative Mary. When Elizabeth sees her, the baby in her womb leaps for joy. A friend of mine was preaching on this text last week and said her daughter re-capped her sermon later in the day saying

“Mommy preached about Elizabeth and when John went kaboom in her womb.”

This is the same 5 year old little girl that upon hearing that she is Mary in the Christmas Eve pageant, said, “Yes, I’m Mary” with added fist pumps. (I’m guessing Princeton Seminary class of 2035.) So when Elizabeth greeted Mary, she was as this sermon title suggests, “interrupted by joy”—the joy of her unborn son, the joy of Mary’s arrival, the joy that in her very presence was the one that would save her—who would grow up to be her Lord. Like Elizabeth, Mary was an unlikely person to be carrying the promise of God’s salvation. She was young, unwed, and poor, which made her marginalized. That is why the picture of these two women—one young and one old—is so striking--- they are the two least likely people for God to choose. They were not emperors, king, or priests—they were two women—two very different women—that had one destiny. They were united by the promise of God’s salvation- they were bound by the love of God that was about to be made flesh. Hope was about to be born through them.

Two churches—two very different churches—one destiny—united by God—bound by Christ—50 years ago today. Faith Presbyterian Church, a predominantly African American congregation affiliated with the PCUSA, was at one point, a thriving congregation on Duke Street in the city of York. Every Sunday, the choir would process through the sanctuary to the hymn we sang today—“God of our Fathers whose almighty hand. Leads forth in beauty all the

starry band.” Joyce Carr, Faith’s organist, would play those familiar notes with passion. Could she ever play!! And her husband Cleo would lead the choir with his deep, melodious voice, only pausing once and awhile to tell his choir to “sing out.” After Cleo would sing “How Great Thou Art” there wouldn’t be a dry eye in the house. Sunday School, Christmas pageants, church picnics, the jolly five club (which was a youth group), and Rev. Cooper’s sermons. All of those comprised the life and the vitality of Faith Presbyterian Church. There are cycles in churches...like relationships there are ups and downs....and when there are a few downs in a row, things begin to decline. And the Faith congregation found themselves in a decline. Like the Israelites, they were wondering if God was going to make good on His promises, how God was going to carry them along this difficult road, if God was going to raise them out of the desert of their despair. They didn’t want to lose their church, but something had to change. And in the middle of their wonderings, in the center of their doubts, in the crux of their uncertainties, in the nucleus of their fears was something they knew all along: ***God will make a way where there is no way.***

And sure enough, Rev. Douglas Parks was called to Faith in 1964 as their temporary pastor and he was charged with the task of studying the community of York and the relationship between Faith and its sister churches in York. Once he was done with his study, he was to make a recommendation the Presbytery

regarding the future of Faith. There were several possibilities: disband the congregation and allow each family to decide what church to attend. Second, turn Faith into some sort of inner city mission, with the end-result being an action that would most likely perpetuate a segregation-type ministry. Or third, merge with one of the existing congregations in the city. After researching several congregations in the area, Rev. Parks thought First Presbyterian Church, a predominantly white congregation, would be a good merging partner for Faith—its pastors were young and progressive and the people he had spoken with in the congregation seemed positive about the thought of a merger. In 1965, before he made his decision, Rev. Parks was called to Selma by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King to help coordinate voter registration drives. In Selma, he was able to bend Dr. King's ear about the proposed merger and Dr. King encouraged Rev. Parks to pursue it. When Rev. Parks came back to York, he worked with renewed energy to form this merger which would be only the third of its kind in the nation. Could an African American congregation merge with a white congregation in the height of the civil rights movement? Could two churches be a visible sign of God's reconciliation that is offered to us in Christ? Could two different churches come together to embody that great scripture we get from Paul that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus?

God makes a way....God makes a way.

Some members of First Presbyterian Church were just as energized by the idea of a merger as Rev. Parks. But, there were some members who were not. Some members felt threatened by the possibility of a merger. People worried if there would be enough physical space for everyone in the church. People worried if FPC would incur debt through this merger. And some people worried that should the merger take place, FPC would lose some of its membership, including some of its best contributors. Dr. Omen, the Senior Pastor at that time, had strong words to those who fretted about this. He wrote, “But, if we should determine that merger is God’s will for our respective congregations, and we are forced to choose between this and the possibility of losing some contributors to our church, and we choose to do nothing because of the almighty dollar bill, we shall be able to call ourselves many things but never again will we be able to call ourselves members of the church of Jesus Christ.” It was looking bleak. Tensions were high at FPC and tensions were high at Faith as well. People threatened to leave both churches. Angry letters were being exchanged. ***But, God makes a way....God makes a way when there is no way.***

Dr. Omen preached a sermon in March of 1965 called “The Anatomy of a Rumor” and it is like he just wrote it yesterday. That is how much it applies to us this day as we face national issues that each day seem to chisel away at the very fabric of our life together. He writes:

We stand on the threshold of hard decisions. Let us not deceive ourselves. The race issue, as an issue, is very much with us. No amount of external veneer can hide the fact that it lies at our door, very much alive. Like the great majority of churches, we have tried to avoid the issues before us, sitting down in the middle of the situation, maintaining a troubled, uncertain silence. The word 'avoidance' best describes our reaction here. It is not indifference, for feelings are strong. The entire relevance of the Gospel and of our church to the social order is involved. This is obviously a situation in which to do what seems right is to bring about much that is wrong. The situation is such that whatever one does will have both good and evil consequences. But this is no excuse for neutrality, indifference, or for doing nothingness. There are many ways in which I might appeal to you this morning, but I can only appeal to you on one basis: that you join with us, with your ministers, your Session, your committee, and with similar individuals and groups from our sister congregation, in coming to grips with this question: What am I, as a Christian, to do? Not, what am I as an individual, nor as a citizen, nor even as a member of this church, but "What am I, as a CHRISTIAN, to do?"

Rev. Brubaker, the associate pastor at FPC in 1965 wrote me an email this week and said the night of "the decision" to merge, both sessions met at their respective churches. One man, named Bill Snowden was designated as the courier or "marathon man" as it was to take the message of each session's decision to the other. Would the two churches agree to merge, in spite of the tension, in spite of the anger, in spite of everything that threatens to tear apart the people of God? Bill Snowden, out of breath with excitement, opened the door to the session room, locked his gaze with everyone at the table and said, "I bring you good news of great joy..." For unto us a child is born and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Around that child, two very different women came together. And around that child, two very

different congregations came together. Why? *Because God always makes a way when there is no way.*

Martin Luther King wrote in his 1963 book, Strength to Love, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others.” Today, friends, we celebrate the courage of those leaders from Faith Presbyterian Church and First Presbyterian Church when they acted boldly for what they believed in, who did not say to themselves “God is on our side” but “Let us be on the side of God,” even if that means risking everything, including our security and our very lives. Elizabeth and Mary were marginalized women who risked their lives to bring our Lord into this world. Our forefathers and foremothers risked their lives for us to worship together—all of us, black, white, Latino, Asian—we are all one in Christ Jesus the perfecter and pioneer of our faith, who is the resurrection and the life, the Shepherd of our Souls, the Lord of hosts, the lamb of God, the bread of life, the alpha and omega, the Prince of Peace and the WAY the truth and the life. To God be the glory! Amen.