

Rev. Lisa Schrott
12-12-21
Luke 1:26-45
Close to Home: Seeking Sanctuary

Last week we heard the birth of John the Baptist foretold - the angel Gabriel coming to Zechariah the priest to share the news that he and his wife Elizabeth, despite their advanced years were going to bear a son, a son who would be called the prophet of the Most High and would go before the Lord to prepare for his coming. This week we hear the foretelling of the birth of this Lord, the one we are waiting for this Advent season - the familiar words of the annunciation - the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary and how Mary responds to this news. Hear now these words from Luke chapter 1 verses 26 - 45. Note we will hear Mary's song of praise in verses 46-55 next week.

The Birth of Jesus Foretold

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

Mary Visits Elizabeth

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "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? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." This is the word of the Lord

What a difference a week makes. Last week the angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that his wife, advanced in years so to speak, is going to bear a son. He is incredulous and when he questions how this can be, he is stuck mute. This week the angel Gabriel tells the young virgin Mary that she is to bear a son, and not just any son, but the son of God. Mary is also incredulous and questions how this can be. Not only does the Angel Gabriel give her an explanation, but Mary finds her voice and is empowered to speak some of the most beautiful words in scripture in her song of praise.

The writer Kathleen Norris highlights the contrast between the birth of John the Baptist foretold and the birth of Jesus foretold. She says, “Unlike Zechariah, who responds to his annunciation concerning the birth of John the Baptist by inquiring of the angel, “How will I know that this is so?” Mary asks, simply, “How can this be?” It is an existential question, not an intellectual one.”¹

For Norris, it is not so much about the theological intent behind Mary (or Zechariah’s) words. Rather how each of us responds to the promise of the Son of God. Norris asks, “How do I respond when the mystery of God’s love breaks through my denseness and doubt? Do I reach for a reference book or a remote control? Am I so intent on my own plans that I ignore the call, or do I dare carry on the biblical tradition into my own life’s journey?”

This is the question of the Advent season for me – well maybe not just Advent – maybe every season. How do I respond when the mystery God’s love breaks through my denseness and doubt? And yes, there are definitely occasions of denseness and doubt. How did Mary respond?

We often concentrate on Mary’s spoken response to the angel ... “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” – so much so that this can become the end of the story. Mary is portrayed as dutiful and faithful, the model of servanthood -especially for women. And there is much merit in this understanding of Mary. But this week as I was living with the text, what really struck me was Mary’s action -

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. Went with haste...the underlying Greek word has the connotation of being eager and earnest to do something and the readiness to expend energy and effort.

Mary’s response to this good news – to this remarkable news – to this unsettling news- is to travel to visit her relative Elizabeth. We don’t know the backstory of Mary and Elizabeth. We don’t know how close they were or when they had last seen each other. We do know they live some distance from each other. And the way the angel Gabriel tells Mary about Elizabeth’s pregnancy makes it seem that Mary didn’t know about it. Being in her teens, Mary didn’t really check out Facebook – the preferred way for older people to share the news – with a sonogram and a cute moniker. Nonetheless, Mary sought expended energy and effort and traveled to see Elizabeth. Sought sanctuary with Elizabeth.

They make unlikely pair on the surface – yet they are bound together through the work of the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth recognizes their intertwined fates, and says those words so familiar to those who pray the rosary – greetings Mary – hail Mary - “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Elizabeth gets her own moment of questioning, “And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.” In the Gospel of Luke, Elizabeth is the first person we see in scripture who gets it. Who understands the significance of what Mary is experiencing.

¹ Kathleen Norris, *Forward. Blessed One. Protestant Perspectives on Mary.* Ed by Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby. Westminster John Knox Press. 2002. p x.

And friends, that it is for me what sanctuary is all about. Those friends and family who just know – who just know when we need a moment of reassurance. Mary may have uttered the words, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word”; yet Mary must have had some moments when the “how can this be” question rose to her lips, kept her awake at night, and prevented her from answering questions of others. And Elizabeth was seeking sanctuary as well. Not sure how she was going to care for a child when she and Zechariah were getting on in years. She too needed reassurance, and husband Zechariah wasn’t able to speak words of encouragement; words of hope. An unlikely pair on the surface, but bound together into a relationship that sustained and nurtured them through days of difficulty; bound them together to celebrate in moments of joy.

His Holiness the Dali Lama and South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu are also an unlikely pair. They too have been drawn together through unseen powers to become missionaries of joy. A couple of weeks ago, the adult education committee sponsored a showing of the movie *Mission: Joy*² about their improbable friendship. It is a delightful and moving account about these two Nobel Peace Prize laureates who call themselves “mischievous brothers” who model joyful practices. Going beyond polite smiles and handshakes, they tease each other, hold hands, and laugh boisterously and joyfully.

Both the Dali Lama and Archbishop Tutu regard joy as a spiritual practice. They shared how their mission of joy has been a process of cognitive reframing, of changing the way they see the world. It is a movement from and an antidote to anger, selfishness, revenge – emotions and actions that separate people from each other. Practicing joy liberates us from resentment.

Now if you know anything about the lives of the Dali Lama and Desmond Tutu, you know that their lives have been far from rainbows and unicorns. The Dali Lama has been in exile since 1959, following a harrowing escape from Tibet to India after China occupied Tibet. Archbishop Tutu was raised in apartheid South Africa. After spending much of his life fighting for an end to apartheid, he headed the Truth and Reconciliation commission, which sought to respond to the various human rights abuses that had been committed over the previous decades by the state and activists. Both men knew suffering and both knew that in suffering we develop compassion. And it is through compassion that you experience joy. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu says, *“When you are kind to someone else, you end up being joyful, but why? Because we realize that we are made for goodness.”*

We are made for goodness. That is what we see in the relationship between Elizabeth and Mary. It is a confirmation of hope – it is a fulfillment of promise. It is sanctuary.

I think about the Dali Lama and Desmond Tutu’s conversation about cognitive reframing – how that helped them embrace joy – helped move them from anger and bitterness to compassion. This reframing was to move them outside of themselves – their own stories and to connect them to the wider world.

² <https://rocofilms.com/missionjoy/>

At its heart, that is the essence of what we do in this season – or at least what our motivations should be. It is not about the cookies or the decorations or the gifts – rather the traditions nurture the relationships that give us sanctuary.

One of the traditions in my family is that Christmas must include trains. Now don't worry – it also includes Jesus – but the trains are very important. Each year as I was growing up, my dad put up a big platform that spanned our living room. It had mountains and rivers with bridges and two levels of train tracks. Being a child of the 1970's we had the Plasticville houses that never seemed to fit together correctly – only after I went to college did my parents upgrade to Snow Village ceramic houses. I loved the process of creating the village, of placing the people and animals and cars in just the right spots. The tradition of the trains around the tree was passed to my dad from his father who worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad. And my dad passed this tradition down to me. Each year we spend way too many hours working on our train platform – a big shout out to my husband Brian who married into this tradition, and was a bit dubious in the beginning, but has now embraced it, configuring and reconfiguring the platform each time we have moved.

So why do we do this? With all the craziness that December brings – why go to all this effort for something that on the surface has so little meaning and has no practical application? Because at the end of the day, it is not really about the train. While the Lionel locomotive from the 1940's is really cool, it is the fact that it was my grandfather's and my dad's before it was passed to me that makes it so special. And while I like running the train while I'm wrapping Christmas presents, I remember the annual open house my parents had every year with work colleagues and church friends and neighbors and all of their kids who got such great joy in running the train. And the joy I have when I get to share the tradition with others. We treasure these traditions because they reflect the relationships that give us sanctuary.

This morning we light the candle of joy. And on our journey to Bethlehem, we placed the stable and manger and some hay in our growing nativity scene. A place of sanctuary for Mary and Joseph on their travels. A place of sanctuary for the Mary to give birth. A place of sanctuary for the shepherds and the angels and the wisemen to visit the infant who is King of Kings. In so many ways this Advent season, we are seeking sanctuary. We are seeking a place to call home – a place where we are understood and we understand. A place where we are safe and a place we can call home. A place where God's love becomes real and tangible and where we know deep in hearts and in our bones we are not alone – we will never be alone.

If you know this sense of belonging and sanctuary, I ask you to think about being like Elizabeth; opening your arms and heart to someone seeking shelter – seeking hope – seeking a connection. And if you are seeking hope – if you are seeking to be known and loved for who you are – if you are afraid or unsure about how the next steps will play out, I ask you to think about being like Mary and reach out to someone – it may be someone you know well or someone more distant. Reach out to me or one of our Deacons. After all we are all seeking sanctuary and we can be Mary and Elizabeth to each other.

Let us pray....