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Luke 1:39-45, 56-58

From Generation to Generation: We See God in Each Other

Two weeks ago we heard the beginning of our scripture today, the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary to share the good news, “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.” As the words of preparation in our bulletin from the Rev. Eliza Jaremko relate, “When Mary is perplexed by the proclamation of the angel Gabriel, the angel doesn’t explain to her the biology of her pregnancy. The angel names a companion: “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.” Gabriel gives Mary the gift of a friend for her journey.”¹

Hear now the words of this gift from the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke:

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.”

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home. Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Advent – hard to believe. If that stresses you out a bit, you are not alone! December 18 is the earliest date that the Fourth Sunday of Advent can fall, because Christmas Day is on a Sunday this year. And as the angel Gabriel says, “Do Not Fear!” for next year the Fourth Sunday of Advent will be later in December, actually falling on December 24, on Christmas Eve. Lots of fun for your pastors and church musicians!

Advent is a season of preparation and as it winds down, we find ourselves asking, “Are we prepared?” After all we have been preparing for weeks – maybe even months. Christmas music has been playing and decorations up around town since Halloween. Black Friday and cyber sales have been filling the airwaves and our inboxes for what seems like an eternity. We

¹ Eliza C. Jaremko. Our Two Christmas Mothers. *Christian Century*. December 6, 2022. This article can be found online at <https://pres-outlook.org/2022/12/our-two-christmas-mothers/>

have baked cookies, trimmed trees, decorated ginger bread houses and have already watched *Elf* and *White Christmas* and Ralphie get his Red Ryder BB-gun. We have been awestruck by the story of Jesus' birth in scripture and song at Lessons and Carols on Friday night. Are you ready? You hear the question in casual conversation when checking out at the grocery store – are you ready for Christmas? You hear it in Fellowship Hall and amongst friends and family – what do you have left to do for Christmas?

It can become like a checklist for us – preparing for Christmas. But are we prepared for Christ? 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, fear and confusion. 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. Yet Mary also responds with action, claiming her own agency. Her response to the good news – to the remarkable news – to the unsettling news- is 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.

Why did Mary go? What prompted Mary to embark on an arduous and risky journey – likely on donkey through the hills - with no mention of a traveling companion - to visit Elizabeth?

Some scholars have posited that Mary went with haste to see Elizabeth for confirmation that the promise of the angel Gabriel was true. And while there may be an element of that in her travel, I think there is more to the story. Author and pastor the Rev. Dr. Paul Simpson Duke posits that Mary made this journey to seek "...companionship with the only person in the world who would understand."² I think about how alone Mary must have felt. Although she has great faith and embraced the good news that she was to bear a son, I suspect she at times felt the weight of the world on her shoulders. Simpson Duke also suggests that Mary was seeking the nurturing wisdom of Elizabeth and that she might be able to offer help to Elizabeth as her time to give birth drew near. Or maybe it was for the sheer joy of sharing the experience – something difficult for Mary to do in a town where her status as unwed, albeit engaged, was well known.

² Paul Duke Simpson. Luke 1:39-45 (46-55). Commentary 2. Connecting the Reading with the Word. *Connections. A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. Westminster John Knox Press. 2018, p61.

I was struck by Simpson Duke's comment that, "Reasons such as these- confirmation of the promise, companionship with kindred hearts, the exchange of wisdom, support and courage, and the flourishing of joy – are among the very reasons we join together in the church. How can we not. The visitation (of Mary and Elizabeth) is the first gathering of the community of Jesus. It invites us to recall how much we need each other, to draw fresh courage from each other, and to celebrate all that we share as bearers of the promise together."³

Bearers of the promise together – that is what we are called to be. Or as the creators of the Sanctified Art liturgy for today remind us, it is to see God in each other.

Mary and Elizabeth make an 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. 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; the first person who understands the significance of what Mary is experiencing. Elizabeth sees, feels, and recognizes the work of God in Mary's visit. And friends, on this Sunday when we light the candle of love, we celebrate the love we share when we recognize God in each other. We celebrate that the church – the gathered body of believers who serve as Christ's body on earth – is at its best when we see God in each other. When we love deeply and profoundly with our voices raised and our hands outstretched and our feet walking a mile in someone else's shoes.

A formative understanding of what this kind love – this kind of seeing God in each other - looks like came from a small group experience I had at a church many moons ago when I was a graduate student. I had joined Center Congregational Church in Manchester, CT, a beautiful white clapboard church on the village green. Most of the people in the congregation grew up in the town and had known each other their whole lives, but it was transient time in my life – I knew I would only be there a few years. The church knew that as well. Yet they embraced me and I became quite involved in the life of the church.

My faith grew and was nurtured in amazing ways at Center Church. I was part of a small group and I enjoyed the fellowship and the Bible study very much. I especially valued making friends with people who lived such different lives than I did as a neuroscience graduate student. They worked in retail and for the newspaper, were retired or caring for children and they helped me see that there was more to the world than my failed experiments and rejected manuscripts. And they were there for me when my housemate Jean died. During those years I lived in a big house, shared with a number of grad students and others who needed a place to lodge. One of my housemates was a woman named Jean who was working on a Master's in Education. She had some significant heart and lung issues and died at the age of 33 while visiting her family in

³ *ibid*

Colorado. This was my first experience of the death of a friend – of a peer. And I was lost. And my housemates were lost.

Cue my church small group. The small group members wrapped their arms not just around me, but around all of my housemates – who were definitely in the “religiously none and done” group before that was a thing. They helped us plan a memorial service and use the church for it. They brought us food. They helped me – all of us - understand that we will get through this. The biggest gift was that they help me connect my individual story to the bigger story of faith – and that this story means that I don’t walk this road alone. Not when I am part of community. And that there is always more than we can see. And that there is always hope.

I think back on that small group so many years ago and wonder if the people in that group know what a difference they made in my life. God’s love and grace were revealed to me in their hugs of compassion and reassurance; what it means to be Christ to each other was revealed in every action, small and large. They taught me there is power in this type of community that responds as the family of faith, as the body of Christ. That people from different walks of life, from different stages of life, from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and yes from different political leanings and theological perspectives can see God in each other. But we have to want to. We have to be willing to put aside our desire to see the face of Christ only in those like us.

For too often we underestimate the power that our actions can make. Mary and Elizabeth model for us this power. As Rev. Dr. Simpson Duke remind us, “Both women bear in their bodies the children of promise, given wondrously by the Spirit; but they draw near to each other from different ends of the spectrum. Elizabeth married to a priest, is established, secure and known to be righteous...living blamelessly according to all the commandments (1:6). Mary, unwed and suspiciously pregnant is socially the opposite. They also come from different ends of the spectrum of age and experience. Elizabeth in her old age comes from a circumstance too late for a child; Mary in her virginal youth comes from a circumstance too soon for a child. John is the miracle after the ending. Jesus is the miracle before the beginning.”⁴

Are we prepared for these miracles? For John the Baptist who tells us to repent, he the voice of one calling in the wilderness, “Make straight the way for the Lord.” Are we prepared to repent of the ways we have failed to see God in each other?

Are we prepared for the miracle of the Christ child? The miracle of the one who is fully human and yet full divine? The Christ who lifts up lowly and pulls down the powerful from their thrones? Are we prepared to live the life Christ calls us to, to be bearers of God promise together – to work and work some more and keep working to see God in each other?

⁴ *Ibid* p62

I invite you in this last week of Advent to embrace this call. To recognize that you may be the only person who will understand the struggles someone is going through and to be there for them, like Elizabeth was for Mary. To offer a helping hand to someone who may not ask for it, but will appreciate it like Mary did for Elizabeth.

This morning we light the candle of love. A candle that reminds us that we need each other, that we need companions on this journey of life and faith. Let us look to Mary and Elizabeth as models of how we embrace this need and let us see the face of God in each other.