

Rev. Lisa Schrott  
December 14, 2025  
Isaiah 61:1-4 & Luke 1:39-55  
*Unexpected Joy*

Over the past two weeks we have been on the outside of the Christmas story, looking in. As we lit the Candle of Hope we considered Isaiah's prophecy of one who is to come and we heard Jesus remind us to remain awake for his return. As we lit the Candle of Peace we heard John the Baptist's call for individual and societal repentance as we work towards peace between nations, communities and within ourselves. This morning we take a sharp turn toward Christmas with a deep dive into a traditional Advent passage. We are starting part way through the story, so let's get caught up on the action so far in the Gospel of Luke.

After an opening statement as to the purpose of the Gospel, an angel appears to the priest Zechariah while he serves in the Temple. The angel announces that his wife Elizabeth, who is past her child-bearing years, will bear a son. This son will be a great prophet, preparing people for the Lord. Zechariah doubts the angel and is struck mute until the prophecy is fulfilled.

In a second scene a few months down the road, the angel Gabriel visits a young woman named Mary in the town of Nazareth. The angel tells Mary that she will conceive a child miraculously by the Holy Spirit. This son will be the Son of the Most High, the Messiah, inheriting David's throne. The angel also tells Mary about her relative Elizabeth's pregnancy, saying, "For nothing will be impossible with God." Mary responds saying, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." The angel departs from her and we pick up the action in Luke 1, verse 39 – 55.

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 said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for the Lord has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name; indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has come to the aid of his child Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

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A few years ago, the Rev. Ashley-Ann Masters, a Presbyterian chaplain and author penned a blog post entitled *Some Lady Holding a Baby*.<sup>1</sup> In this post, Masters recounts a visit to a grocery store check-out line a few days before Christmas. She says “I was standing in line when the customer in front of me asked the clerk if she had any Christmas stamps. The conversation went like so:

Customer: “Do you have Christmas stamps?”

Clerk: “No. We just have Liberty Bell and some lady holding a baby.”

Customer: “Can I see them? That’s Mary holding Jesus. I’ll take those.”

Clerk: “How did they get a picture of them?”

Customer looks back at me to hide laughing, so I chime in, “I bet it’s someone’s interpretation of what they may have looked like.”

Clerk: “Maybe. ‘Cause I don’t think anyone took pictures back then.”

The customer went on about her purchase and the customer behind me and I pretended to look at magazines in attempt to snuff our laughter. As the clerk scanned my items she kept going back to “some lady holding a baby” and said she sold those stamps for weeks and never knew it was Mary and Jesus. I put on my best game face and attempted to converse with her. I even managed to say, with a straight face, “It could happen to anyone.” As I retrieved my bags, I couldn’t help but wish her “Merry Christmas” as I walked away. She responded, “Hey, you too!”

I shared this story a few years ago on Christmas Eve and am sharing it again this morning because the ending of it reminds me that Christmas is about the power of connection. It brings me joy along with a little giggle. Mostly I love it because as much as we are harried and busy and annoyed by the inconveniences of weather and crowds or despairing about the economy or what’s happening in our country and our world, every now and again, sometimes despite our best efforts to be grumpy and grinchy, we find ourselves experiencing priceless moments of joy when our shared humanity shines a bright light in the darkness. When our hearts leap with joy.

I imagine both Mary and Elizabeth found themselves in a situation where they needed connection and support. A few verses prior to our reading this morning we hear these words: After those days Zechariah’s wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://revaam.wordpress.com/2013/12/20/some-lady-holding-a-baby/>

seclusion. She said, “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

Elizabeth was bearing a child at advanced age, after experiencing years of childlessness. In the culture of the time, bearing a child was seen as a blessing from God and conversely childlessness was seen as a sign of God's judgment or disfavor, especially for females. Elizabeth lived for years in a society that told her that her worth as a person was tied to her ability to bear a child. She lived for years with scorn and shame.

And when she finally found herself pregnant, her husband Zechariah was unable to respond verbally to her. To make her laugh when the absurdity of the situation got too much; to reassure her that he would be there with her through the birth and the childrearing; to cheer her on when her fears and doubts overwhelmed her.

What Elizabeth needed more than anything was a friend to walk beside her during the last months of her pregnancy. A friend who could help transform the fears into joy. Enter Mary, a relative of Elizabeth. Sometimes, Elizabeth is referred to as Mary's cousin, but the Greek word refers to a female relative, a person who belongs to the same extended family or clan.

During the season of Advent, we often focus on Mary's response to the work of the Holy Spirit, her words, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Mary is praised for her willingness to accept this gift bearing the Word made flesh, a gift that will completely shake up her life. And while the angel Gabriel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God,” my guess is Mary had a few fears and anxieties going through her head. The scorn and disgrace that Elizabeth was felt as an older childless woman was similar to the scorn and disgrace Mary faced as unwed teenage mother. What Mary needed more than anything was a friend to walk beside her during the beginning of her pregnancy as she adjusted to her calling from God.

Whatever their kinship, age differences and stages of life, Mary and Elizabeth connected at a deep level. As the authors of the *Illustrated Ministry* Advent liturgy share: “When Mary arrives, Elizabeth's is the first prophetic voice to affirm the sacredness of Mary's calling—not by status or success, but by trust and blessing. Her greeting is not small talk—it is sacred proclamation. “Blessed are you among women,” she exclaims, filled with the Holy Spirit. In a world that mocks the hopeful and silences women's voices, Elizabeth speaks anyway. She sees, she names, she blesses. This moment between Mary and Elizabeth is thick with prophetic imagination. They do not avoid hard truths—they carry them in their bodies. They do not ignore injustice—they name it and dream beyond it. Their encounter is joy: not the absence of hardship, but the in-breaking of God's kingdom through courageous solidarity.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Illustrated Ministry. The Will to Dream. *Commentary & Preaching Guide*. [illustratedministry.com](http://illustratedministry.com)

This beautiful scene of unexpected joy between Mary and Elizabeth and their unborn children is a pivot in our Advent season. The Third Sunday in Advent is known as Gaudete Sunday (Gaudete is Latin for rejoice) and it marks the movement from waiting in hope and waiting for peace to the joyful anticipation of their fulfillment in the birth of Jesus.

This beautiful scene of unexpected joy between Mary and Elizabeth, the connection between the two women is also a pivot in Mary's story, in her claiming her identity. The connection gives Mary the freedom and courage and joy to sing with her whole heart and with a strong and bold voice "... all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name." Mary has turned from timidity to bravery, claiming her space and the hope for the world for the one she will bear. For the world is about to turn.

*My heart shall sing of the day you bring. Let the fires of your justice burn. Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn.*<sup>3</sup>

*The Canticle of the Turning* is one of my favorite Advent hymns as it puts to a secular Irish tune the words and spirit of what we refer to as *Mary's Magnificat* or Mary's Song. The song was written by Rory Cooney, a Catholic liturgist and church music composer from Arizona. In article about the history of the song, it is noted that the hymn author Cooney wanted "to compose something contrasting the docile Marian songs he grew up with, specifically citing a hymn popularized in the 1950s, "Lovely Lady Dressed in Blue," by Mary Dixon Thayer, a writer of children's hymns, prayers, and poems: *Lovely Lady dressed in blue— Teach me how to pray! God was just your little boy, Tell me what to say!* Cooney's song expresses the energy of a Jewish girl in her teenage years living in a land that had been politically oppressed by numerous cultures for centuries—Rome being the latest."<sup>4</sup>

Mary's song echoes the words we heard Ellen read from the prophet Isaiah, words that proclaim the message of one who will bring good news of deliverance, transforming despair into praise and righteousness for all nations. Mary's song begins with praise: "my soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..." I can imagine her starting off softly, maybe even hesitantly, a bit mystified as to all that happening around her, yet full of praise. And then she hits her stride and her song becomes one of power and protest. Of affirmation. Of promise. Of joy. And of justice. Mary's yes to God becomes fully realized in her song. She is not going to shrink back and hide this Word Made Flesh. She is going to revel in the new thing God is doing through her, while she supports her relative Elizabeth and while Elizabeth supports her. The power of connection.

Elizabeth and Mary may have been in different places and different spaces of life. But their bond was powerful as their worlds expanded to include each other. As they stretched to care

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<sup>3</sup> Cory Rooney. Text of *The Canticle of the Turning*. *Glory to God Hymnal* #100. Westminster John Knox, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/articles/history-of-hymns-the-canticle-of-the-turning>

for each other. In the words for preparation in the bulletin, I shared words from author Stephanie Duncan Smith from an article she wrote titled *Expanding Beyond Ourselves* for the Center for Action and Contemplation. Duncan Smith said, “We stretch by reaching toward each other—by reaching out from the solo act into the plural “we,” the pronoun God loves most. Life is long, the feast is wide, and we are meant for keeping it together. Our hearts are a muscle made in the image of God, made for connection. And there are so many ways of being kindred.”<sup>5</sup>

Friends, the plural “we,” is truly the pronoun God loves most and our hearts are muscles made for connection. In a world where loneliness is epidemic, where violence stains the very places our children, youth and young adults inhabit to grow, where politicians and pundits still try to shame and scorn people for their choices about relationships and bearing children, we are invited to exercise our hearts muscles and connect with each other, to be Mary to your Elizabeth and to be Elizabeth to your Mary. To bring unexpected joy into someone’s life. To promote joy in the world by working toward justice. May it be so. I invite you to rise in body and spirit as we share our Affirmation of Joy.

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<sup>5</sup> Stephanie Duncan Smith. *Expanding Beyond Ourselves*. *Center for Action and Contemplation*. December 1, 2025. <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/expanding-beyond-ourselves/>