

## LOVE

By Rev. Ridgley Joyner

Luke 1:39-56

In this season of Advent, the lectionary has invited us to dwell solely in the gospel of Luke. Which I think is really helpful. So often we read a little here, a little there of the Christmas story from each and what we know is a mixture of all the gospels. The book of Matthew for instance starts with Christ's genealogy, tells of the Angel visiting Joseph, and the story of the Magi following the star to pay homage to newborn Jesus. The book of John starts with a very theological lens—talking about how Jesus was with God even before the world was created, and ending with a quick “and then the word (read: Jesus) became flesh” then jumps right into John the Baptist's witness and preaching. The book of Mark dives right in with Jesus's ministry—John the Baptist is preaching and Christ is baptized. All of them include a grown John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness, and an adult Jesus carrying out the ministry of God. But only one gospel includes the early parts of the birth story in such detail as Luke.

Last week we started our season of anticipation at the end of Luke hearing of Jesus' teachings of end times—the signs that we would see that harken the kingdom of God—the advent—the second coming of Christ. These next two weeks we are focusing on the angels coming to share good news of great joy—to Zachariah about the birth of John the Baptist, and today, to Mary about the birth of Jesus.

Mary's Magnificat is a well known text, in more than just this time of year. A young teenage woman proclaiming what God has done and what God will do in such a poetic model of faithfulness has been a testament to the church for years. Mary is a model disciple not simply because she was *chosen* but because she was faithful to what God was doing and will do.

More about the Magnificat and its significance

But, as we read today, we discover that mary's song—the Magnificat—doesn't happen immediately after Gabriel shares this surprising news of mary's gift and call. One does not take this news in and simply continue living life—what's next? How do you follow *that*? It is confusing and joyful and scary and exciting and scary

and awe-inducing and scary. Even though Gabriel says “do not fear” we can imagine that this teenage girl was very scared.

When I was preparing for today, I couldn’t stop noticing the very first verse of our scripture reading. Mary got up and *hurried*. Mary hurries, not home, but to her cousin Elizabeth’s with this news. Luke is very specific in some instances and yet in others very vague. We hear him saying “in those days” and Mary heading to “a city in the Judean highlands” yet we know exactly how far along Elizabeth is—6 months. It is hard to know why rushing to Elizabeth was Mary’s first reaction.

While this was a very holy and sacred thing that Mary knew only God would make possible, we can’t help but wonder who would believe her. And it would be more than just whether they believed her. In ancient near eastern culture during Mary’s time, an unwed teenage woman getting pregnant meant more than just public scrutiny, people making judgments, whispering. It would mean more than her being publicly shunned, unwed women who conceived a child would be stoned to death in front of her father’s home. This was an act that inflicted not only shame on the woman but also her father—in turn her whole family was in danger.

So, why was Mary hurrying to Elizabeth’s? Perhaps it was an act of preservation for her family. Perhaps Elizabeth *would* believe this good news of great joy. Perhaps Elizabeth might understand. After all, a barren woman in those days was subject to as much shame as a teenage woman might be.

Immediately Mary hurries to Elizabeth, and we are told that immediately after Elizabeth hears Mary’s greeting, she opens the door to Mary and Elizabeth is filled with the holy spirit. John, in utero leaps with great joy.

This morning at the threshold of Elizabeth’s home, we read of a moment shared between two women at two different points in their lives being brought together—one young having a child before marriage, and one old considered “unable to conceive”—the tie that binds them is what is growing inside of them. What they are waiting on with anticipation. These women are the bearers of the good news of great joy.

Elizabeth can’t help but blurt out loudly “God has blessed you above all women, and He has blessed this child you carry. As soon as I heard your greeting the baby

in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the lord would fulfill the promises he made for her!”

What a holy moment. There in that space. One woman newly pregnant, another headed into her third trimester. It is then that we hear of this well-known song of Mary’s—the Magnificat—It is only *after* Mary heads to Elizabeth and is greeted with such welcome arms, that Mary is able to proclaim her faith that God would fulfill the promises made to her.

Elizabeth greeted Mary with an open door, knowing by the look on her face that she needed sanctuary. Elizabeth greeted Mary with an open door by shouting the great good news of the Lord! Elizabeth greeted Mary with an open door reframing a fearful prophecy to an opportunity for faith and courage in uncertainty. Elizabeth, sees Mary, welcomes her in, and helps her digest for herself what is ahead.

It is so often we focus on something as beautiful and poetic as the Magnificat, but I think verse 56 at the end of our reading really ties this moment together. Luke tells us Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about 3 months and *then* returned to her home.

I don’t know about you, but that’s the part I always miss. I know about Gabriel, I know Mary was scared despite the “do not be afraid”, I know John leaps in the womb. But this part, I’ve been guilty of glossing over. Elizabeth doesn’t just greet Mary and confirm her call to be the theotokos—the “god bearer”. Elizabeth brings her into the fold. Into her home for an extended period of time. The first trimester is filled with so many changes for mothers—there is excitement and changes for Mary as well and there is so much anticipation as she awaits God’s advent. Elizabeth made space for Mary in that moment of need, and then made space with hospitality in a season of need. She protected Mary not only from public scrutiny, but possibly even death.

After 3 months Mary returns home, she doesn’t hurry home. She returns home strengthened, empowered, loved. It is Elizabeth too that was a “god bearer” in that season for Mary. She gave Mary a home in a time of need, yes, but in that season Elizabeth was Mary’s home—Elizabeth was Mary’s sanctuary.

I wonder for you, do you have an Elizabeth? When you were fearful of what was ahead, and this person reframed it for you to give you the courage to take a step in faith? Or perhaps your Elizabeth is a person you know will ask no questions, and let you just be in a time of need. A person who could speak the truth in love. A God bearer--a person who truly embodies the love of God for you—who was your Elizabeth--the person who enabled you to weather a season you didn't think you could weather alone?

I wholeheartedly believe that we are given Elizabeths by God to supplement the angels—the ones that give us fearful news and follow it up with “now don't be scared” —we are given Elizabeths that help confirm and make what sense we can of the times and the places we find ourselves.

Perhaps the piercing of this question has brought about the realization that you *need* an Elizabeth, that you have isolated yourself in a time of great need. May you hear this great good news: you are not forgotten, you are loved, and you are welcome here.

Rev. Austin Shelley says it best “When the fight-or-flight instinct gets the best of us and tells us to hunker down behind a wall of fear, I hope and pray that we will instead run with Mary to Elizabeth—to the arms of a faithful covenant community that will remind us of God's many blessings and embolden us to turn again toward home, toward the face of Jesus in the faces of those who have fled for their lives, toward the one whose messengers almost always begin with ‘Do not be afraid.’”

At this table, we, a weary fearful and waiting people find sanctuary in God, returning to a familiar place to remember that we are known, loved and claimed by God. Here at the threshold of this table we are nourished, but we are also sent forth. We are called here to this table—in this space---at a particular time to experience the safety and comfort of a God who offers us sanctuary. Who knows us as we are and welcomes us still.

Yet even as we eat, we are sent—sent forth to be Elizabeths for the people in our lives—strangers and loved ones alike. To welcome the tenderhearted, to support the weak, to make a home with no questions asked for those society would shame for their circumstances.

It is no secret that in times like these—God gives us this scripture passage—to remember that it takes a village, and we must not forget our village. The very thing that binds us to one another is the love of God we experience through the love we share with one another. As we wait for the Lord, let us open our arms wide, let us attune our hearts and eyes to those among us in need of God bearing, in need of a reminder of the good news of great joy. For it is there that the love of God dwells. Let us wait for the Lord...

### **A Blessing Called Sanctuary**

You hardly knew how hungry you were  
to be gathered in, to receive the welcome that invited you to enter entirely—  
nothing of you found foreign or strange, nothing of your life that you were asked  
to leave behind or to carry in silence or in shame.  
Tentative steps. became settling in, leaning into the blessing that enfolded you,  
taking your place in the circle. that stunned you with its unimagined grace.  
You began to breathe again, to move without fear, to speak with abandon  
the words you carried in your bones, that echoed in your being.  
You learned to sing.

But the deal with this blessing  
is that it will not leave you alone, will not let you linger in safety, in stasis.  
The time will come when this blessing will ask you to leave,  
not because it has tired of you but because it desires for you  
to become the sanctuary that you have found—  
to speak your word into the world, to tell what you have heard  
with your own ears, seen with your own eyes, known in your own heart:  
that you are beloved, precious child of God, beautiful to behold,\* and you are  
welcome  
and *more* than welcome here.

—Jan Richardson from *Circle of Grace*