

Sermon “Giving Birth”
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December 19, 2021

Luke 1:39-55

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

⁴⁶ And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

SERMON – “Giving Birth”

Mary and Elizabeth were cousins that, despite their difference in age and status, shared a special bond, a sacred bond. Both their lives had been changed forever with the appearance of an angel. The angel had told Elizabeth’s husband, John, who was a priest which gave him standing in society, that they would have a child. It was a miracle for this elderly woman who had given up on having children because she thought she was too old. But now she was pregnant.

The angel had appeared to Mary. Gabriel told her not to be afraid, that she had found favor with God, that she was blessed, and she would give birth to God’s son. He would be the Son of the Most High. It was beyond belief since she had not known man. And Mary said yes to that angel, yes to God. Mary was pregnant.

So, both women were pregnant, though neither had imagined this would be happening to them. It was amazing and created a special bond between Mary and Elizabeth. It was so amazing that even the infant in Elizabeth’s womb knew something miraculous was happening.

Mary, a pregnant, unwed teen, left her village and traveled to visit Elizabeth. I imagine Mary’s story would have been pretty unbelievable to those in her village. I wonder what Mary’s parents said when she told them she was pregnant and going to have the Son of God. And what about Joseph? In Luke’s gospel, Luke does not tell us what Joseph said when he found out. But if Mary were found to not be a virgin when she was married, she could be stoned to death.

And the neighbors? I don't know what they thought, but I bet they weren't praising Mary's name and calling her holy. Life could have been very difficult for Mary in her "yes" to God.

But when the angel told Mary that her elderly cousin was six months pregnant, Mary knew that Elizabeth would understand. She knew that Elizabeth's pregnancy was also unimaginable. Both of their lives had been turned upside down by the angel of God. So Elizabeth would understand all about angels, their pronouncements, and the miraculous births about to take place. Elizabeth would get it. So Mary went quickly to visit her.

Elizabeth did get it. She and the baby in her womb got it. They knew that Mary was to be the mother of God, of their Lord. We don't know how Elizabeth knew - no angel that we know of had appeared to her. And we don't know how the baby knew. But Elizabeth's baby wiggled, kicked and moved in her womb. He leapt for joy. That unborn baby let Elizabeth know that Mary's presence, and the presence of the infant in her womb, was something to get excited about.

Mary, a meek, lowly, country, unwed young mother-to-be was to give birth to God's son. Lowly. Ok, I can go with that. Meek. I'm not so sure about that. It's easy to equate Mary's humility with being meek. But when she spoke to Elizabeth, Mary's words did not come from a place of meekness or of quiet acceptance of what was happening or of the status quo in the world.

Mary recognized that God had bestowed something special upon her. She told Elizabeth that her soul magnified the Lord. The essence of who she is, the person she is, glorifies God. She rejoices in God because God has honored her, a lowly young woman, with this pregnancy.

She recognizes that she has a role in history, that she is blessed because she is called to give birth to Jesus, to be the mother of God. And for a common girl, this is no common thing. It is amazing. Despite what she might have had to go through at home, despite what she might have to go through in the future, she knows she is called to participate in the coming of Jesus into the world and changing the world.

And Mary speaks boldly, that her son –

will confuse the proud,

bring down the powerful,

lift the lowly,

fill those who hunger with good things,

and send the rich away with nothing.

And those who fear her son, in every age, will receive his mercy.

Talk about turning the world upside down!

These words are not the words of a timid teenage girl. These words are prophetic, they even foretell the words that Jesus will speak to his followers. They sound like Jesus' words the first time he preached in the synagogue in Nazareth – telling those present that he would bring

good news to the poor, release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and free the oppressed. They are not words that a lowly, unwed mother would expect to hear from her son.

But Mary, with Jesus still in her womb, spoke her words with strength, with courage and with faith - faith in the promises of the God of Abraham, the God of history, her God.

And Mary was able to share her faith in God's plan through her words to Elizabeth. Mary and Elizabeth knew that the angel of God had blessed them with special infants in their wombs. And the bond between them gave Mary strength to express these unimaginable thoughts of God's plan.

With whom do you share a special bond? Who is it that gives you strength? Is it a friend, a spouse, a parent, a brother or sister, a child, or maybe even a grandchild?

Who encourages you in your life? Who gives you courage? Courage is a word that sits within the word encourage. Who do you go to when you need courage or encouragement?

Who can you speak to about your faith? With whom can you share what you carry in your heart and soul? Who understands and encourages you to speak your truth, God's truth? Who reminds you that you can believe in God's promises?

This fourth Sunday of Advent, we see the unlikely pregnancy of these two women of faith. Their pregnancies are a visible sign of anticipation, of birthing something new. They are key to the miracle of Advent and our journeys toward the birth of our God in history and in us. Through this time of Advent, we have listened to how this unfolding miracle affected those people in Jesus' life. We have been waiting through Advent, anticipating the birth of Jesus, who was laid in the animals' feeding trough, a lowly birth indeed. Maybe we have even pondered how Jesus' birth affects our lives.

Jan L. Richardson, in a reflection on God's call to Mary and God's call to us, writes:

Not to one but to many you have called:

come

on the edge of the dancing wind

come

from the deepest forest

come

from the highest places

come

from the distant lands

come

from the edge of darkness

come

from the depth of fear

*and become the bearer of God.*¹

Advent is a time of anticipation, waiting for the birth of the Christ Child. Because we, like Mary, are favored by God. We are God's beloved. We are blessed by our God, by the birth of Jesus, by God's love. Advent is inviting us to do more than wait, it invites us to become bearers of God in our world and to change our world for the better.

I saw a little piece of that in this church hall over the past few weeks. I saw blankets being made for children in foster care. For some of these children, who had come from homes where they lacked love, it was a message that someone cared. I saw smiles on the faces of children, parents, coaches and volunteers from this church as the children decorated gingerbread houses. As this church welcomed these children and their parents, strangers shared fun. Joy was birthed over gingerbread, frosting and candy.

Like Mary, we are invited to participate in the birth of our God in the world, and change the world – or at least a little piece of it. You and I, we can all do it. We can all bring love, joy, peace and hope into our world. We can light that candle of Love, carry it in our hearts, and then let it shine through us to all we encounter.

We may not have heard the words of an angel, but Christ has already been born in each of us. The Christ who we are waiting to be born at Christmas is alive in us. We can share that news. We can share that love. And we can be bearers of Christ.

As we reflect on Mary's meeting with Elizabeth, and her words, we can take them into our hearts and our souls, and make Mary's words our words and let them guide our lives.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Amen

¹ Jan L. Richardson. Night Visions, searching the shadows of advent and Christmas. Cleveland, OH. United Church Press. 1998. p. 7.