

Sermon: “A Bond, a Blessing, and Beyond”
Olivet Congregational Church, UCC
Reverend Lisa Eleck, MDiv
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SCRIPTURE

Luke 1:39-56

Mary Visits Elizabeth

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

Mary’s Song of Praise

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

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

56 And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

SERMON A Bond, a Blessing, and Beyond

One of my favorite paintings was not painted by some famous artist and is not on display in a museum. I would see this painting every Advent in the Catholic Church that my daughters and I attended as they were growing up. It was actually painted by my daughter's high school art teacher, Mrs. McKinnon. Any words I share with you to describe this painting are inadequate. But I want to try to describe this painting to you.

In this painting, two dark skinned women, Mary and Elizabeth, are facing each other. Their arms are outstretched as they grasp each other's hands in what appears to be a dance. While we can only see one woman's face, that face is framed by long brown hair with wisps and touches of gray. And there is a look of maturity in the face of that woman whose headscarf and robe blend shades of blue highlighted by streaks of dark yellow and white. I assume she is Elizabeth. The other woman has her back to us. Her headscarf and garment are shades of purple framed by yellow and gold with gold highlights throughout. We cannot see her face or her hair as it is within her long headscarf. I imagine this is Mary. White light splashes on both women, more so on Mary. And the background blends from pale yellow surrounding the women to deep yellow at the edges of the painting, bathing the women in a glowing light.

This contemporary rendering of Mary and Elizabeth's meeting has been a cherished memory of mine for over 30 years. This painting made the encounter which we hear this morning, that holy moment between Mary and Elizabeth, come alive. As I would stare at this painting in church, I could feel the love and joy of these two women in this holy and sacred moment of connection, a moment of their souls' embrace.

But there's more to our scripture reading this morning than the love and joy of two cousins, one young and the other old, but both miraculously and unexpectedly pregnant as told by an angel, sharing that bond of upcoming motherhood. They also shared a bond of blessing.

Mary, that teenage mother-to-be had gone to visit her cousin, a pregnant older woman who had been thought to be barren. Mary knew Elizabeth would understand the special nature of her pregnancy. She knew Elizabeth would understand because the angel had told Mary that Elizabeth was also miraculously pregnant. Perhaps Mary also knew that Elizabeth could use another woman to be with her in the final months of her pregnancy, as she prepared to give birth to her son, John.

When Mary arrived at the home of Elizabeth, Elizabeth greeting her with words of blessing. Luke tells us that Elizabeth's son leapt in her womb and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. She then offered these words of blessing to Mary, she proclaimed them loudly saying, " '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 leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.' "

Elizabeth acknowledged that she was blessed to have Mary come to her. And she was filled with the Holy Spirit. And then she acknowledged that the child in Mary's womb was God, her Lord. And she acknowledged that Mary was blessed – not only in her being chosen by God to give birth to God's son. Mary was blessed to say "yes" to God. Elizabeth offered support and empowered her young pregnant cousin with her words of blessing.

Once in the safety of that trusted older woman, that teen spoke words of strength and courage. Perhaps she had gained courage and strength in her journey to Elizabeth's house, reflecting on the words of the angel. Perhaps she had felt them in response to Elizabeth's words to her. But Mary acknowledged that she was blessed, that she had a place in God's plan, saying,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.”

Mary acknowledges her own lowliness – her place as a young woman from a small town with no societal standing. She acknowledges the honor, blessing and joy of being chosen by God to give birth to Jesus. But her words also show how she has grown in wisdom, strength, and courage since the appearance of that angel who told her “Do not be afraid.”

And she acknowledges all God has done for her and God’s people - God’s mercy, God’s strength in toppling the powerful, and God’s hand in uplifting the lowly, filling the hungry with good things, and fulfilling God’s promise to Abraham, that his descendants would be God’s people. Mary’s words are prophetic. She proclaims God’s devotion to God’s people across the generations of Jewish people, God’s mercy and his faithfulness, and the special place of the hungry and lowly in God’s heart.

In the home of her cousin, as the baby Jesus was growing in her teen aged womb, Mary was growing into the strong, prophetic woman who was to give birth to God’s son and live as one of his first disciples. Mary would share the joys, challenges and sorrows of being the mother of Jesus, a radical, itinerant preacher – God’s son – who would upset the applecart of first century, Roman-occupied Israel.

Mary proclaimed her words, shared her blessing and her faith in God’s work with Elizabeth, who had also proclaimed the blessing of God on the two of them. Mary’s words have been passed down from generation to generation, shared with us today. But they were first loudly proclaimed between two women who shared a special bond. In that bond, they recognized God’s presence in their lives. God’s blessing. God’s call.

In our Advent Devotional for this coming week, Dr. Christine J. Hong writes of Mary and Elizabeth’s encounter. She speaks of Elizabeth greeting Mary at the threshold of her home but also at the threshold of her life and the life of the world. She states that Elizabeth greets Mary with “welcome, anticipation, and a powerful blessing... Any fear that Mary had was met with the contagious courage of Elizabeth, courage enough for both of them. They were one another’s spiritual

midwives – birthing together transformation grounded in one another’s courage and steadfastness. They wondered together in liminal space, on the threshold of a new world. And through their spiritual and relational partnership, Mary and Elizabeth framed the path of partnership for their children, too.”

Mary and Elizabeth, spiritual midwives for each other with their faith bursting forth, both saw that they were blessed. They supported each other – sharing the gift of their pregnancies and their faith. I imagine that in the three months they were together, preparing for Elizabeth to give birth and with Mary helping deliver the infant John, these women grew even closer. I imagine they shared their dreams of and for their sons, Jesus and John, growing up together and having their own bond which began with the Holy Spirit in their mothers’ wombs. Both boys would grow up be told that they were blessed and that God had plans for them.

The theme for our worship this Advent, developed by sanctifiedart.com, is “FROM generation to generation.” As we reflect on these two women who unexpectedly shared and developed a special bond through their pregnancies and their faith and God’s actions in their lives, let us also reflect on those individuals in our lives who have nurtured our faith and assured us that we are loved and blessed by God. Let us reflect on those who have given us courage and strength to live out our faith, to live God’s love.

As we look to Mary and Elizabeth, as we turn to our scripture, we are reminded that we cannot do this work alone. So let us reflect on how we work, as individuals and as a church, to live our faith and serve, to lift the lowly, to feed the hungry and to show mercy. And let us reflect on how we partner with others beyond this church, from generation to generation, to share God’s love and bring it to our world. Blessed by God, we are called by God to do God’s work.

Together.

Let it be so.