

Sermon 12-10-23
Paul Purdue preaching

Earlier in chapter one, Luke tells us that Elizabeth “was righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord,” but she and Zechariah were unable to have children and were getting on in years. Each year, Zechariah went to Herod’s temple to serve as a lay priest for several weeks. Elizabeth stayed home, tending the garden and managing their family’s interests. When Zechariah came home, he was unable to speak, using a little tablet of wet clay and a sharp stylus, Zechariah told Elizabeth of a holy moment while offering the evening offering for the nation. Zechariah had a vision of a child they would have who would preach like Elijah and lead a movement that connected people with God, justice, repentance, and each other. But Elijah was not 100% sure. With the tablet and gestures they got by. In time Elizabeth conceived a child. The old rabbi’s believed every child was a kind of miracle and Elizabeth’s later in life pregnancy was especially amazing. Elizabeth said to herself and a precious few, “This is what the Lord has done for me, God has looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

Despite being “blameless before the Lord”, people in her congregation twisted a few Bible verses here and there and judged Elizabeth as less. Elizabeth felt the reproach of her people. To not fit in, to sense pious eyes looking down on you, wearies our souls. For five months Elizabeth remained in seclusion.

Luke shifts the Christmas story to Mary “when Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth to Mary who was engaged to Joseph.” Unlike Zechariah, we do not know where Mary was or what she was doing when the angel appeared to her. Luke only shares her marital and sexual status. There is a weariness in that. The Angel declares “Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!” Confused by the call to rejoice, Mary wondered what kind of greeting the angel brought. The angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High and there will be no end to his kingdom.” Mary asked the angel, “How can this be?” The angel answered with a long but an almost non-answer concluding “Nothing is impossible for God.” Gabriel’s words echo the Messenger’s words to Sarai, after she laughed, “Is anything too wonderful for God?” (Genesis 18) Mary asks, “How can this be?” The answer comes with few details: The Holy Spirit, the power of the Most High, holy happenings, Miracle Child, Elizabeth is six months pregnant, Nothing is impossible for God.” If Mary’s family or the purity police had asked “Mary, how did this happen?”, would “Nothing is impossible for God!” satisfied her inquisitors?

Mary answers, “Let it be”. With no concrete evidence beyond her personal experience Mary answers, “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be!” Maybe Jesus learned to lean out in faith from his mother. Do you remember Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane “Father, if it’s your will, take this cup of suffering away from me. However, not my will but your will be done.” Let it be. God is with us. Let it be. When the angel left, Mary headed for the hills to see her aunt.

I tend to mesh Joseph’s story in Matthew with Luke’s story of Mary and imagine that Mary fled her home fearing the reproach of her people and the unlikely enforcement of some terrible Levitical laws. I think Mary found a refuge of acceptance, safety and hope in the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah, but Rev Cecelia Armstrong and Rev Lisle Gwynn Garrity commenting in [A Weary World Rejoices @ A Sanctified Art](#) suggests that “Perhaps, Mary’s arrival becomes

the inbreaking that changes everything for Elizabeth.” Mary needs Elizabeth, but Elizabeth needs Mary. “Perhaps, Mary’s arrival becomes the inbreaking that changes everything for Elizabeth, for in that moment the child leaps in her womb and she is filled with the Spirit. She can’t help but rejoice. Her joy is contagious and wraps around Mary like a hug!” Mary’s presence leads Elizabeth out of seclusion. Elizabeth offers Mary a welcoming home, wisdom, and safety. Misdirected charity reduces people to needs, dehumanizing them. Love sees people with needs as partners, each of us with something to give one another. Jewish wisdom flowing through Jesus tells us that when we welcome a stranger or feed a hungry soul we welcome God to our tables. (Matthew 25) How does a weary world rejoice? We rejoice by opening our hands, homes, and hearts to another.

“When the angel left, Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, “God has blessed you above all women, and God has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 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 to her.”

Elizabeth’s affirmation confirmed Mary’s story. To be heard, to be accepted, and to be believed changes everything. Happy are you Mary for believing that nothing is impossible for God. Elizabeth names God’s presence in the middle of events shaking up Mary’s life. Was Elizabeth’s blessing the first time someone heard Mary’s story without judgment? Elizabeth blurts out in a loud voice “Blessed are you among women... blessed is the fruit of your womb! Mary, I am so lucky to have you here!” To have someone completely lose their stuff when they see us, to jump up and hug us, to blurt out a loud blessing enfolds us with love and empowers us with hope! Maybe that is why we love dogs and little children, they are unafraid to go bonkers with joy when they see people they love! In a world prone to cursing, why do we withhold our praise? Why do we think people must prove their worth, instead of naming them as beloved? Can not praise inspire us more than shame or blame?

In a world filled with cursing, criticism and sarcasm, blessings may appear pollyannaish. What good can an affirmation do? 25 years ago, a middle schooler drew a heart and wrote on a Post-it note, “Go PPP preach the Word!” They stuck it on the pulpit. I left it there for 2 years! Our blessings can change everything. Spiritual friendships can create safe spaces to unload our weariness and to vocalize joys so tender we dare not share them with the world. Spiritual friendships can break the bonds of seclusion, oppression, bitterness, and fear and empower us to find our voices. Indeed, strengthened by Elizabeth’s blurted out blessings Mary finds her prophetic voice. Mary’s Christmas Carol speaks of justice: “God has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed.” Lifted up by Elizabeth, Mary lifts up her voice for others!