

26 When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, 27 to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" 29 She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. 31 Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. 33 He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom."

34 Then Mary said to the angel, "How will this happen since I haven't had sexual relations with a man?"

35 The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God's Son. 36 Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled 'unable to conceive' is now six months pregnant. 37 Nothing is impossible for God."

38 Then Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said." Then the angel left her.

39 Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. 40 She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. 42 With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. 43 Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. 45 Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises God made to her."

46 Mary said,

"With all my heart I glorify the Lord!

47 In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.

48 God has looked with favor on the low status of God's servant.

Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored

49 because the mighty one has done great things for me.

Holy is God's name.

50 God shows mercy to everyone,

from one generation to the next,

who honors God.

51 God has shown strength with God's arm.

God has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations.

52 God has pulled the powerful down from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.

53 God has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty-handed.

54 God has come to the aid of his servant Israel,
remembering God's mercy,

55 just as God promised to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."

56 Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months, and then returned to her home.
- *Common English Bible, textual alterations by Pastor Sarah underlined*

For many years I avoided preaching on Mary and Elizabeth. For four infertile Advents I sat uncomfortably with these two improbably pregnant women— one pregnant too late, one pregnant too soon. But, every Advent we remember their pregnancies... and when all you want to be is pregnant, and old Elizabeth is pregnant, and young Mary is pregnant it just throws in your face what you are not... pregnant. So, I took a pass on preaching this passage. But having finally given birth, sixteen years ago, in the first week of Advent— it feels possible to spend some time with these women now.

Mary went with haste to a town in the Judean hill country. She high tailed it to the hills... immediately after learning, from the angel of the Lord, that she was about to become pregnant, with a holy child. Whether she conceived, by the Holy Spirit, before she hit the road or after... she was very newly pregnant when she made it to the residence of her cousin Elizabeth. Before I knew that I was pregnant, all I knew was that I was inexplicably, utterly, and completely tired. All I wanted to do was nap. Oh, and I felt lousy; I thought, maybe, I was getting the flu. The last thing I can imagine wanting to do in those earliest days of pregnancy is to take a trip by foot, into the hill country. But Mary wasted no time, she went with haste, overcoming the nausea, the exhaustion... she had to get to Elizabeth, her cousin, who, after years and years and years of infertility was also pregnant.

Elizabeth, we're told, spent five months in seclusion after an angel visited her husband and told him that she would conceive, and took his voice away when he struggled to get his around the news that now, after decades of trying, now... a baby would come. Elizabeth didn't go anywhere when she conceived. And she didn't hear much of anything either. With her husband silenced until after the birth of their long-awaited, long-desired child... she truly was secluded.

Mary made a different choice. She did get away from her familiar environs for her first several months of pregnancy, perhaps it seems that she too is secluding herself, but she opted not to be alone. Much is made of Mary's faith, as well it should be, that

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this young woman, a girl by today's standards, consented to a pregnancy that might have ended her plans for marriage and, indeed, might have ended her life... one who conceived out of wedlock could be killed for her offense... so that she consented is truly remarkable. But I believe that it is highly possible that her faith was mingled with fear. Luke tells us nothing about Joseph. Perhaps Mary told him and then left town, giving him time to think it over. Or perhaps she left town seeking the strength to tell him. Or perhaps she just figured an angel would fill him in on the details. But she really didn't know what he would choose to do with that information when it came his way. John Calvin suggests that Mary went with haste to Elizabeth not because she didn't believe the Word of the Lord that had been spoken to her, but because even believing, she needed her faith to be strengthened, and the only way this could happen was through encounter with another who could exhort and encourage her.

I found myself wondering this week what Mary's greeting to Elizabeth sounded like. Was it breathless? Was it timid? Was it excited? What did she say? "Elizabeth! It's me, Mary! Peace!" "Um, Elizabeth? It's Mary." "Oh Elizabeth, I'm SO glad to see you." Whatever she said it was music to Elizabeth's ears, and to her womb, these words that broke a nearly 6 month silence set the fetal John to dancing. We sing in this season of lords a leaping... I think of that when we hear not once but twice that the sound of Mary's greeting led the child within Elizabeth to leap for joy. Mary didn't just come to receive exhortation and encouragement, she came to give it as well.

I once heard a sermon that was rather hard on Zechariah for his doubt in response to the message he received from the angel. But... my heart broke for Zechariah and Elizabeth as I thought about their story. After years of monthly disappointment, crushing disappointment, after all hope had passed... now? How could he go home and get his wife's hopes up? How could he do that to her? He wanted some assurance, some backup for this improbable promise... an easy reading of the text is that he was struck dumb in punishment for his doubt, but... I think this was a gift from God. What, on earth, could he say? Only God could speak the words Elizabeth would need to hear. So he held his wife in silence. And together they conceived.

But I imagine that Elizabeth at once believed she was pregnant and struggled to believe as well. I believe this because even after laboring for hours with my daughter, pushing for hours, I still had trouble believing a baby was really coming. For so many years a baby had not come to me, for so many more years a baby had failed to come to Elizabeth. But on that day that Mary arrived, she felt the new life within her leap as if for joy. If she was really in her sixth month of her first pregnancy this might have been one of the first times she was certain she felt the child move. And as everyone who has ever been pregnant knows, this is a moment which helps a mother to know that she is becoming a mother. So Mary's greeting strengthened her faith, it exhorted and encouraged her, about the blessing that was unfolding within her.

And then the two of them, as Luke tells the story, speak in a way that only the Spirit of God could allow them to speak. Elizabeth knows Mary is pregnant before Mary has said a word about it, before her belly displays it. And Elizabeth blesses Mary, she speaks with joy of what this pregnancy means and of Mary's faith. And then Mary sings... she sings of the marvelous reversal of fortunes that her conception and her eventual birthing will bring... the powerful pulled down from their thrones, the lowly lifted up, the hungry fed, the rich sent away empty... though she is but a lowly servant, an unwed teen living in a small town in a small country groaning under imperial oppression... she will be called blessed for generations because her humble womb holds the promise of God. Mary speaks of realities that lie in the future in the past tense. She sings with confidence of the things that God will do, as if they've already been done. I believe she found the faith to do so only in the presence of her kin Elizabeth. Both Mary and Elizabeth were filled with the Holy Spirit, but they needed to share with one another to realize the fullness of the gift they had been given, and in so doing each is further strengthened.

Mary and Elizabeth both birthed their babies into a dangerous and violent world. They testified to the goodness and mercy of God, but this goodness and mercy would not spare them from terrible heartache. Perhaps Elizabeth died before her son met his bloody end. We know that Mary did not. We know that these women are sisters to us in our grief. We know that they too lived in our fearful and tragic world. But they sang for joy. They lifted each other up. In each other's presence they connected with

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the God who makes everything alright in the end. You've heard that saying, right? "Everything will be o.k. in the end. If it's not o.k., it's not the end." When Mary and Elizabeth held on to each other, they could feel this in their bones, they could connect with the Spirit in their hearts, and they could bring it to voice so to strengthen the other.

In just a few moments Laura Hays is going to commit herself to membership in this church. All summer long in your intimate chapel worship, Laura was knit into our community though brand new to us. When we met for coffee several weeks ago she named so many of you and celebrated the warmth of your welcome. She has discovered the gift of mutual exhortation in Christian community. Thanks be to God. Many in our world need this gift. Many are carrying heavy burdens of grief and fear and struggle. I pray that we will continue to strengthen one another in our own struggles, but also that we will remain open to sharing this gift with those yet outside our community. There is great strength to be drawn from praying with and being prayed for by kindred in Christ. Let's continue to find ways, in these dark and holy days, to greet one another, and when we do, may new life leap within us, for really, it will be o.k. in the end, for our God makes and keeps promises, our God takes on flesh to be with us, our God does great things, our God is faithful... no matter what.