

## 1 Sermon, December 8, 2013

Text: Luke 1:39-45

Title: "The Story of the Love of God: Mary and Elizabeth"

In those days, Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, to the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Why would Mary go with haste?

Well, imagine Mary as a girl of 13 or 14 years, the typical age to be betrothed. She is still living in her parents' home, and is found to be pregnant.

Do you think that would go over well in her community?

There would have been no legitimate reason for her to be pregnant in the eyes of the neighbors, only suspicion as to who the father was. Even today in some parts of the world there are "honor killings" where the girl is killed because she is pregnant out of wedlock.

So you can imagine that Mary would go with haste to a safe place, to her relation in a town far away, to stay with her kinswoman Elizabeth.

And there is Elizabeth, who has become pregnant at a relatively old age. Old age might have been 30. But God had blessed Elizabeth and allowed her to conceive after much disappointment. Elizabeth is happy in her pregnancy.

So not only is Mary running away to a place that's safe, she's going to a place where she might be understood, where she might be listened to without judgment. You can imagine that Mary, despite the faith that the scripture tells us she has, would be scared and searching for acceptance and hope.

When Mary arrives, what should happen but the baby inside Elizabeth leaps for joy. Or at least that's how Elizabeth interprets the movement of the baby inside her.

And so Elizabeth encourages Mary by saying:

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Now, technically, it would be the Holy Spirit speaking through Elizabeth who said "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

## 2 Sermon, December 8, 2013

But doesn't the Holy Spirit tend to speak to those who are suffering or unjustly accused, and tell them they're blessed? Isn't that one of the things the Holy Spirit does — comfort the afflicted?

And here the Holy Spirit speaks through something powerful — a kind of mentor relationship between a more experienced woman and a girl coming into womanhood. The Holy Spirit speaks through trust and through wisdom conveyed by experience.

I was talking yesterday to a woman in her 30s who has that kind of a relationship with a woman in her 20s. The younger woman has a three-month old baby, and calls the older one for advice and encouragement. It's a life-giving relationship; and I'm sure the Holy Spirit is involved in their relationship more than they're aware.

How much more so would have Mary needed that kind of non-judgmental mentor.

So, in the midst of a story of dislocation – of Mary having to go to Bethlehem for the census, and then flee to Egypt later – in the Midst of Mary's story there is a place of comfort and acceptance — of life!

The story of Mary and Elizabeth is one of life. We're reminded of that because the child in Elizabeth's womb is kicking. And here it is the Holy Spirit making the in-utero John the Baptizer leap for joy.

The Holy Spirit can make something in us leap. It can excite us for joy and hope.

I read some sermons recently from a deceased pastor in the Conference by the name of I Dean Jordan. His granddaughter lives in the house next to the church on Harrison St. Dean Jordan's sermons were poetic and thoughtful, and would end with the words, Amen. Amen. Amen.

So be it, so be it, so be it.

Blessing, blessing, blessing.

God is good. God is good. God is good.

### 3 Sermon, December 8, 2013

God *is* good. It's just we human beings get tempted by other things, like power or comfort or excitement or possessions. We human beings tend to make things harder than they really need to be. We tend to get confused as to what the priorities should be. So we human beings tend to make things harder for each other.

God's Holy Spirit speaks through the Amen of a baby's kick, the amen of an older mother's proclamation, and then the young mother responds far beyond her training or ability and speaks words of wisdom about the powerful being cast down from their thrones and the lowly being lifted up.

In other words, the Holy Spirit puts us all on the same level, the level where we can relate to each other.

Sin pulls us apart, builds suspicion and mistrust.

The Holy Spirit pushes us together, makes us equals of each other, and tells us to get along with each other and build peace.

It's an all-year message, but we hear it most around Christmas: "Peace on Earth and goodwill among men." That's the message that the story of Mary and Elizabeth tells us.

Luke's gospel tells us that Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months. Mary had a home-away-from-home with Elizabeth.

After those three months, Mary returned *home*, which would have probably been her parents' home.

The stories of Jesus in Luke and in Matthew are different. Matthew focuses on Joseph; Luke focuses on Mary. So we don't really know what Joseph's part in the whole thing was – could Mary have returned from her three-month-stay with Elizabeth and gone to live with Joseph and maybe Joseph's family?

We can only speculate, but the point is that Mary could somehow return from Elizabeth's home and now it was more OK to be pregnant. Somehow the community had come to accept Mary. Praise God!

One commentator on this passage said that we need more Elizabeths in the world. We need more Elizabeths to make safe the Marys, to allow the Marys to sing a song of freedom. We need more Elizabeths who nurture Marys until they can return home.

#### 4 Sermon, December 8, 2013

We need more Elizabeths who help those coming out of prison find their place in society. We need more Elizabeths who listen to the foreigners in our midst, who listen to and help the ones who are somehow shamed or feeling out of place.

Fortunately, we have Elizabeths in this world, and some of them are here among us. But maybe one of ministries is to support each other so that we all may become a little more like Elizabeth.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

"In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "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 leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'" Luke 1:39-45, NRSV.