

**Sermon – December 22, 2019**

**Blessed in Love**

**Text: Luke 1: 26-45**

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we are invited to reflect on the stories of two pregnant women. One old and barren, the other young and unwed. Two stories of a blessed journey as each woman carries the mystery of God's love for all humanity in their bodies.

First, there's Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife who was relatively old, thought to be barren, but who would finally become pregnant after years of waiting. Like all Bible stories, the telling of Elizabeth's pregnancy is embedded in the patriarchal assumptions of its time. Luke assumed that the couple's childlessness was due specifically to Elizabeth's "barrenness." A barren womb in Elizabeth's day was a source of shame, disgrace, and embarrassment. Her "failure" to provide her husband with a child to carry on the family name was even cause for divorce. Moreover, in a society in which women in general, we treated as second-class citizens, for a woman to be unable to bear a child served to compound her lowly status. But even within a patriarchal culture, I imagine that while Elizabeth was indeed grateful to have the social stigma of infertility lifted, she really wanted a child to love and cherish. Countless women over the years have surely imagined the same when they heard this story and empathized with her situation. When Elizabeth found herself pregnant, Luke says, she went into seclusion for five months. She must have been shocked about this news and perhaps because of her old age, she is not ready to show herself off to the community.

And then there was Mary - a Judean young woman, in her early teens, in first century Nazareth, almost certainly uneducated, pregnant, unwed and living in a Roman-occupied territory. Mary's mysterious visit by the angel Gabriel, informing her of a mysterious birth must be a shock to her: "Greetings Mary! The Lord God is with you! There's nothing to be afraid of! You will give birth to a baby boy and will name him Jesus! Don't worry, he will be great..." Mary must have swoon in agony! For many women, getting the news of a pregnancy is joyous; for others, like Mary, it's frightening and overwhelming. Mary must have felt alone and isolated, like no one would ever understand her. And the text tells us: "Mary set out and went with haste..." She

must get out of town quickly and there is only one person who can help her in this worrisome situation: her lovely cousin and kinswoman Elizabeth. These two women were given one to another. They were given the provision of another outcast with whom to make a bond. The angel had said to Mary “guess what – you’re not alone. Elizabeth, your much older cousin has also conceived a baby. Go and visit with her.” So Mary makes haste to the hill country. A brave journey if ever there was one.

Mary is a young woman by modern standard, and she is pregnant and unmarried. There was no legitimate reason for her to be with child and no legitimate reason in those days that anyone else would buy. In our day, this might be a small scandal. In her day, it would have been earth shattering. So, if I were her...I’d do something about it fast and furious with haste. I’d find someone who can possibly offer me with words of wisdom – someone who will not judge me but one who will offer a listening heart and support.

It’s a tender scene, when she arrives – these two women in their exquisite embrace; pregnant with the message and the messenger. When Mary enters Elizabeth’s house she doesn’t find judgment or a doom-and-gloom “I told you so” speech. When Elizabeth opened the door to let Mary in, when embraces and tears have been exchanged, the child in Elizabeth’s womb, according to Luke, not kicked but leaped for joy! This baby in Elizabeth’s womb, as we know, is going to be a future prophet in the person of John the Baptist and he has already begun preparing the way for a Messiah even in the womb! His leaping for joy says it all: *“Mary, the child in your womb is God’s chosen One! Bring him out into the world so the world will know the true meaning of joy and love!”* Mary is met with acceptance and a word of blessing from Elizabeth: *“Mary, blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!”* It must have meant the whole world for Mary to have heard those words. Like fresh water on a scorching day. Like a warm shelter on a blazing snowy day. After feeling shame and the possibility of being an outcast, she was declared to be a blessing.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for 3 months and I imagine them bonding, cooking and eating, walking in the garden, and sharing stories. God gave them one to another. As if God says to

them: “Mary, and Elizabeth, you are not alone. You have each other.” Instead of shaming Mary, Elizabeth welcomes, blesses, and celebrates her, treating her as more honorable than herself. Thus, the pregnancy that might have brought Mary shame brings joy and honour instead. When Elizabeth welcomes Mary, she practices the same kind of inclusive love that Jesus will show to prostitutes and sinners. She sees beyond the shameful situation of Mary to the reality of God’s love at work even among those whom society rejects and excludes.

Mary and Elizabeth were gifted with two things they lacked: community and connection. Their encounter means that God has removed their isolation and fear of the unknown and helps them to understand themselves more fully as bearers of new birth. Rick Morley says it beautifully: *“There’s a lot going on here, but what strikes me is that we need more Elizabeths in the world. We need more people willing to move past judgement and shaming, and offer God’s blessing. We need people who look upon the world and see God’s redeeming hand at work, not just see the worst in other people and ourselves. And we need to feel that call to bless deep within ourselves, like a child leaping within us. For if there were more Elizabeths in the world doing that holy work, there just might be more people breaking out into holy song like little Mary.”*

In response to Elizabeth’s blessing, Mary sings. And how she sings! In Mary’s song famously known as the Magnificat, she sings of a God who brings down the powerful, who lifts up the lowly, who fills the hungry with good things. Strangely, wonderfully, Mary sings of a God who not only *will* do these things, but who *has* done these things. She sings as if God has already accomplished the redemption and restoration of the world. I am inspired by the words of the Methodist minister, Rev. G. Kevin Baker when he says: *“While we look for change in the centers of power—in courtroom chambers and lawmaking bodies—God scatters our power and presumption, pointing our attention to a maternity ward where faithful women, like Mary and Elizabeth, pray and praise the “mighty one who has done great things,” the one who is still doing great things, and often in the most unexpected of places.”*

Elizabeth and Mary were given the gift of connection and community. The same is true for us. We are called to be for each other. We are not alone. Perhaps this is the message of the birth of

Jesus. After all, Emmanuel means *God with Us*. Nadia Bolz Weber says it beautifully: Those who feel isolated from God and from each other God comes as a baby to say, “you are not alone...*You are not alone in your isolation. You are not alone in your joy. You are not alone in your grief. You are not alone. God is giving us one to another.*”

We are about to welcome and celebrate a birthing in three days. Not just an ordinary occasion – but one that the whole world awaits. The birth of Jesus...the beginning of a new, wonderful thing that God has done and is doing in and for the world. How do we welcome Jesus and say “yes” to his birthing? Is your heart throbbing with love? How is love being born in your individual lives? What is God doing in your life so that you may include all people who are excluded and treated as shameful in our society today? Will you journey with those women who were put down due to barrenness? Will you offer a sanctuary for those unwed young mothers who were looked down by the community? Will you listen to the Spirit’s prompting when those who were deemed shameful or excluded show up on your doorstep?

Dear friends, on this Fourth Sunday in Advent, we all are invited like Mary and Elizabeth, to give birth to new possibilities and opportunities to serve and be Christ for others and the world. May we, like Elizabeth and Mary, give thanks that God has taken away our shame and then respond to God’s love by welcoming the shameful. May we, like Mary and Elizabeth, become a community that supports each other as we hope and wait in love. Thanks be to God! Amen.