

“Blessed Is She”
Luke 1:24-45
The Second Sunday of Advent
December 10, 2023
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Luke 1:24-45, translated by Dr. Wil Gafney

After those days Elizabeth his wife conceived, and she hid herself for five months. She said, “This is the Holy God’s doing; God has done for me when God looked favorably on me and took away my disgrace among humankind.”

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town of Galilee, Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the name of the virgin was Mary. And the angel came to Mary and said, “Rejoice, favored one! The Most High God is with you.” Now, she was troubled by the angel’s words and pondered what sort of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, “Fear not Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Sovereign God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his sovereignty there will be no end.” Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I have not known a man intimately?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit, She will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the one born will be holy. He will be called Son of God. And now, Elizabeth your kinswoman has even conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for she who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the woman-slave of God; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel left her.

Mary set out in those days and went to the hill country with haste, to a Judean town. There she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. Now when Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. From where does this [visit] come to me? That the mother of my Sovereign comes to me? Look! As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting in my ear, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Now blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of those things spoken to her by the Holy One.”

“This is the irrational season
when love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason
there’d have been no room for the child.”

(After Annunciation by Madeleine L’Engle)

Poet Madeleine L'Engle was right when penning these words about the annunciation to Mary. "This is the irrational season"...in so many ways.

This is the season of angel appearances and "do not be afraid" and "hosanna!" and of miraculous unexplainable mysteries. And though perhaps we ourselves have not received a message from an angel, we embrace the irrationality in our own ways. It is irrational to bring Fraser firs into our living rooms and decorate them. It is irrational to cover your house in lights. It is irrational to wrap presents and store them under a tree until the morning of the 25th, when you tear open the beautifully-wrapped packages only to throw the paper away. It is irrational to light candles in dimly-lit sanctuaries and sing hymns to a baby born over two thousand years ago.

Luckily, L'Engle concludes her poem with gratitude that Mary was blessed with irrationality because if there'd been reason, there'd have been no room for the child. What a blessing that Mary, an unwed Jewish teenager living in Roman-occupied Palestine, possessed just enough irrationality to bring forth the Word of God.

Mary, most often depicted in art as approached by the angel Gabriel in her home, was told that she had been chosen to conceive and bear God's child, one upon whom many names of honor would be spoken, whose birth and life and death and resurrection would be talked about for thousands of years to come. Mary, an unwed Jewish teenager living in Roman-occupied Palestine.

She says, "How can this be?" and maybe her question is not about whether or not she had been sexually active...maybe her question is moreso rooted in self-doubt. "Why choose me? What is special about me? What does God see in me? What is God expecting? Can I live up to the expectations? Do I have what it takes? Can I handle it? Do I dare consent? Am I enough?"

"Sometimes opportunities are presented that convey seemingly unachievable expectations," Ashley Cook Cleere writes in the Feasting on the Word commentary. But Mary, firmly situated in the Hebrew Bible tradition of miraculous pronouncements and angelic declarations, overcomes the "how can this be?" and "why me?" of the situation and consents. Mary dares to say "yes" to God's call on her life. Mary dares to say "yes" to participating in the work of the Divine on this plane of existence. Mary dares to say "yes" and humbly proclaim her worthiness and her enoughness, which in my opinion, is far more challenging than saying "no." Mary claims her blessing, which in the fullness of time, becomes a blessing for us all.

But our text for today isn't interested in "the fullness of time." It is interested in what Mary did right after getting this incredible call from the Holy. No doubt surprised, afraid, confused, questioning, anxious, isolated and more, Mary undertakes the journey to see her cousin Elizabeth. Mary seeks connection in the face of the profound weariness that must have set in as the consequence of

Gabriel's angelic pronouncement.

Now, from a Biblical scholar perspective, it is important that Mary visit Elizabeth. Elizabeth's lineage is from the priestly line of Aaron, and Mary is her cousin, so she is related to the priestly lineage. This will be important as Mary seemingly fulfills what had been predicted by long-ago prophets about the Messiah. And Elizabeth was going through her own wondrous pregnancy.

As I was preparing for this sermon, I realized that I usually heard the story of Mary visiting Elizabeth as significant because Elizabeth served as a mentor-figure for Mary: she was older, she had been pregnant longer, she could extend a maternal care for Mary that otherwise would be absent from the portrayal of Mary's family we get in Luke. Whenever we do talk about women in Jesus' family, which isn't often enough in my opinion, we often focus on Mary...and for good reason! She receives, and then becomes, a blessing for the world through her status as Jesus' mother.

And Mary becomes a blessing for Elizabeth.

Elizabeth, now in the sixth month of her pregnancy, had been isolated for five months, the scripture tells us. And remember, her husband the priest Zechariah, had been silenced by the angel...so Elizabeth didn't even have him to converse with.

Elizabeth must have been so very lonely. I think many of us have had that experience where we are overwhelmed by grief or fear or anxiety such that we feel like no one understands what we are going through. It is a normal human experience, perhaps felt even more acutely amid the heightened expectations of the holiday season. But for Elizabeth, it is even more true that no one else understands quite what she is going through—perhaps the matriarch Sarah would be the closest one, having conceived in old age. Elizabeth had married a priest and had dedicated her life to religious service, life situations that can be isolating. But then she finds herself pregnant and without peers to converse with!

Did Elizabeth even know the meaning of the pregnancy she was carrying? How would she have known, since the angel visited Zechariah and upon announcing that Elizabeth would conceive, Zechariah was silenced? Did the angel visit Elizabeth later, in an incident not recorded by the fastidious author Luke? How did Elizabeth experience this pregnancy, potentially having gone through the heartache of infertility or the pain of miscarriages before this rainbow baby?

In a statement about her painting *Two Mothers*, on the front of your bulletin, depicting the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, Nicolette Peñaranda writes,

“A couple of months before I took on this project, I was forced into early labor and birthed our second child. Needless to say, I was still pretty raw with emotions and was processing the trauma. During that time, I found myself in isolation. Our days were spent driving back and forth to the NICU to check on our 3 lb infant. It was terrifying and tiresome. But during that time, so many wonderful people sought us out. We were gifted food, baby clothes, childcare, and rest. But the greatest gift was the comfort I received from other people who had given birth. There was this sacred sharing of birth stories and postpartum depression. Parents passed on beautiful garments that they, too, received after

birthing a preemie. Some of these pieces looked like they had been passed down many times before, like each thread held a memory from a different family.

We were connected. It is because of this connection that parents share that I felt instantly connected to paying homage to Frida Kahlo's Two Fridas. Rather than being connected from veins of the heart, Mary and Elizabeth would be connected through the uterus.

Nearly a quarter of Black women between ages 18 and 30 have fibroids while also being the racial demographic with the highest maternal death rate in the United States. More than 100,000 women undergo some form of mastectomy each year. Globally, an estimated 14% of girls give birth before the age of 18. Where do these realities meet the heart of scripture? How do we see the struggles of infertility or empathize with the vulnerability that comes with not being a socially-accepted pregnant person?

While Elizabeth is crowned with holy gray hair and a dress marked with the blood of previous miscarriages, Mary sits next to her holding a childhood doll, draped in the jewelry, flowers, and silks of a traditional Middle Eastern Jewish bride. Their stories and experiences are vastly different. But Mary sought out her kin. This reminds me that we do not need to do the hard things alone. There is power in connection. With you, there is joy."

Our Advent theme poses the question, "how does a weary world rejoice?"

Peñaranda answers through her artwork, "we do not need to do the hard things alone. There is power in connection."

Mary found connection to the Holy One through the voice of an angel, telling her that "nothing is impossible with God" and setting her apart to follow her cousin Elizabeth in pregnancy. And Elizabeth found connection when Mary traveled the 80 or so miles from Nazareth to Hebron to pull her out of isolation. Mary gifted Elizabeth an opportunity to be seen and known, sharing the incredulity and the awesomeness of what they were experiencing together.

I wonder if Mary and Elizabeth both had the thought pass through their minds at one point or another, that "this was no time for joy." Given the military occupation of their land and the political corruption in their government, the social expectations that both women were bucking, the passiveness of the men in each of their stories (Zechariah by silence and Joseph by omission at this point in the story)...the stress must have been just too much for them sometimes. These were human women, set apart in accepting God's call and yet mortal in their experiences of the pangs of heartache and worry and shame and fear. I wonder if they ever thought "what is joy doing trying to break in? Can't Joy see that I am overcome and overwhelmed? This is no time for Joy!"

Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity shared a reflection on joy and weariness related to our Advent theme, remembering how she had that thought "this is no time for joy" when she found herself smiling and laughing for the first time after mourning her grandmother's death. She felt guilty in feeling joy. She writes, "I wondered why I felt so uncomfortable by joy's intrusion. When did I decide

that joy didn't belong with my grief? Who told me that joy is selfish?...I've decided that joy is a companion emotion. Almost always, it comes alongside other feelings: excitement, sadness, exhaustion, relief, apprehension. It's also a transformative emotion; joy changes you. It can shift your perspective. It can bring warmth to those around you. It will certainly lighten your load."

Mary and Elizabeth can attest to the complexity of rejoicing alongside weariness. They sought that connection that brought them both joy. They said yes to the connection. They faced up against a weary world that would only grow wearier throughout the lives, and deaths, of their sons, and yet...they would rejoice. Rejoice in the blessing of women closely sharing their lives. Rejoice in the blessing of seeing plainly each other's calling and consent. Rejoice in the relationship of their hearts. Rejoice in connection to one another.

Perhaps there was a moment of peace shared between the two women, a moment of contentment where they held hands and closed their eyes and just breathed together. Perhaps they stored up the peace they found in their connection for another day, a cloudy and dismal day that surely would come. They knew that the joy was right up next to weariness, the momentary peace would be answered with violent threats and calls for harm to God's children. They knew that the "yes" Mary uttered and the fulfillment of God's promise Elizabeth was holding would change the world...starting with their own worlds. Perhaps they gave thanks for each other and blessed each other.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "To pronounce a blessing on something, it is important to see it as it is." And that is a gift that Mary and Elizabeth offered each other. Seeing the hope and the worry and the amazement and the fear and the gratitude and the trembling all mixed together.

So today, here together, we listen: to the angelic annunciation, to Mary's consent, to Elizabeth's gratitude, to the tentative bubbling disbelieving laughter of the pregnant people. And as we listen, and see the world as it is, and see each other as we are, we pronounce this blessing,

Blessed is she. She who believes. She who carries. She who supports. She who visits. She who mourns. She who births. She who buries. She who celebrates. She who receives. She who dares.

My hope for you, for me, for us, is that in this irrational season, we can join the blessed ones in daring, as professor of worship Kimberly Bracken Long offers this challenge: "Dare we proclaim that God breaks in, to restore, reveal, and redeem the mess we have made of the world? Dare we proclaim that God's gospel of justice and peace may turn our world upside down—and that this news is very, very good?"

May it be so. Amen.