

Sermon Series Week 3: *Journey to Bethlehem... with Elizabeth* December 13, 2015

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the Child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill God's promises to her!" Luke 1:39-45

*The Canticle of Mary (the Magnificat)* from Luke's Gospel

Worship Leader: Mary sang these words:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord!

Everyone: My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, who has looked with favor on me, a lowly servant.

Worship Leader: From this day all generations shall call me blessed.

Everyone: The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is the name of the Lord, whose mercy is on those who fear God from generation to generation.

Worship Leader: The arm of the Lord is strong, and has scattered the proud in their conceit.

Everyone: God has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

Worship Leader: God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich empty away.

Everyone: God has come to the aid of Israel, the chosen servant, remembering the promise of mercy, the promise made to our forebears, to Abraham and his children for ever.

Worship Leader: The glory of the Lord shall be revealed...

Everyone: And all flesh shall see it together!

St. Francis of Assisi is credited for creating the first crèche in 1223. Most people didn't read in those days, nor did they understand Latin, the language of worship, so pictures and plays were the ways they learned bible stories. St. Francis is said to have set up a manger with hay and an ox and a donkey in a cave in the Italian village of Greccio, and invited the villagers to come look at the scene while he preached about the birth of Christ. I love to read, but I also love that pictures, theatre, and crèches, can convey meaning and truth beyond words. Our stained glass windows are not just decoration; they tell us stories about people from the bible. When our children were growing up we watched Sister Wendy, who's a British nun and an art historian, on PBS. Sister Wendy taught us how to really look at a piece of art for the messages and meaning the artist wanted to convey.

On Wednesday the preschoolers and I came in here for "chapel" and we looked at a simple olivewood crèche I have. We named the people and animals, and I passed around the Baby Jesus, so that each of them could hold Him, and rock Him in their hands. This crèche on our altar is also carved olivewood but more elaborate and expensive and on-loan to us. It's been delightful to travel through

Advent with it... to travel to Bethlehem with the players in God's drama: Mary, Joseph, the donkeys and sheep, the shepherds. The Baby Jesus isn't here yet, in this crèche, and the wise men are still a ways off. But the rest of them are here, gathered around the manger, and I've paid more attention this year to these simple people who were chosen and included in God's impossible plan to be with us, to become one of us. Last week I quoted the author Madeleine L'Engle who wrote, "To be a Christian is to believe the impossible."

On Friday evening the preschool put on their Christmas program here in our sanctuary. They told the abbreviated version of Christmas... in a matter of minutes the angel Gabriel had announced to Mary that she would give birth to God's son; Mary and Joseph arrived at Bethlehem where they found no room and so Mary had her baby in a stable; and wise men traveled by the light of a star to find and worship the new King. This is how Christmas is celebrated culturally... just the highlights. It's completely appropriate theology for preschoolers... but like studying art, or the carved pieces in a crèche, there's more to the story than the highlights, more than a brief glance can convey.

This is Advent, a quiet season of the heart, a slow season, unknown to the culture we live in; a season that takes its time - with four weeks of candles to light - to remind us that God's light is still coming into the darkness, into our darkness... in the world and in ourselves. Advent reminds us that God's story unfolds, rather than pops up, once every year in December. On Sundays in Advent we hear more of the unfolding of God's story, and as we journey to Bethlehem, as we study these people chosen by God, we see more of who they are... and hopefully more of who we are... because God's story is still unfolding and God is still including and using ordinary people in God's plan to heal and redeem the world.

There is someone missing in the crèche; I realized it for the first time this year. At first glance it looks like all the important characters in God's drama are represented but where is Elizabeth? Elizabeth was the very first person to recognize Jesus, the Christ, the Chosen One of God. She and her son both recognized Jesus at the same time. Before Bethlehem... before the journey there, the birth in the stable, the star, the wise men... apparently even before Mary and Joseph talked with each other about their separate angelic encounters, Mary went to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. Luke's gospel tells us that an angel had visited Mary, and told her that although she was a virgin she would give birth to a son, who would also be God's Son, and the Savior of the world. Luke tells us that Mary was perplexed by the angel's words, and that the angel, who delivered this overwhelming news to the teenage mother-to-be, told her, "Don't be afraid." We don't tell people, "Don't be afraid," unless there is something to be afraid of.

When the angel left Mary right away went to Elizabeth's house. There's no mention of Mary's parents or siblings or a girlfriend... but there was Elizabeth. Mary knew to go to her. Mary knew someone who loved her, who would listen to her, who would help her, and that's where she went.

Today we travel on the way to Bethlehem with Elizabeth, who was Mary's relative, an old cousin, (incidentally also miraculously pregnant) and Mary's friend. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle said that friendship is the art of people holding up a mirror to each other's soul. The early Celtic church called the kind of

friendship Mary and Elizabeth had, “anam cara” which is Gaelic for soul-friend. A soul-friend is a teacher, a companion, a spiritual guide; someone who can be trusted with one’s innermost self. Separated by age (they were different generations) and by distance (it was a nine or ten day walk between their houses) Elizabeth was Mary’s soul-friend. Elizabeth said two things to Mary that tell us that she was a soul-friend. Elizabeth said, “I see Jesus in you.” (Actually she said, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the Child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill God’s promises to her!”) And more indirectly Elizabeth said, “I see God in this weird and messy and potentially awful situation.”

Life is hard, and messy, and potentially awful. As we journey together I think what Elizabeth said to Mary are two of the most important things we can say, we can give, to each other. “I see Jesus in you.” And “I see God (or I will look for God with you) in this hard situation.” It’s easy to look past people, to not really see them, to not notice that everyone we meet is made in the image of God. To see the spark of divine in every person is an exercise in mindfulness and awareness and deep gratitude, because we too carry within us the divine image of God. Because I’m a clergywoman it might seem easier for me to say to someone, “I see Jesus in you” than it is for you. So you have to find your own language that conveys what Elizabeth told Mary... “You are blessed... I see Jesus in you.”

In our cultural language “blessed” means lucky or fortunate. That isn’t what Elizabeth meant though; she meant, “You’ve found favor with God; God is using you to bring light and love and healing into the world; God is in you, and with you.” We tend to gloss over what it meant to an unmarried, teenage girl, like Mary, to be pregnant. The Law was harsh, and the consequence for her alone (not the man who got her pregnant) was being stoned to death. Imagine the conversations with Joseph, about finding herself mysteriously pregnant with God’s Son, that Mary must have visualized having. But Elizabeth told her, “You are blessed. I see Jesus... I see God’s grace personified... in you.” To say to someone, “I see Jesus in you” is to say, “I recognize God’s beautiful gifts in you. I appreciate how God’s love shines in you. You make a difference in the world.” At anytime those are amazing, wonderful words for us to say to each other, but most especially this time of year when we are all trying to keep our heads above the rising waters of buying and wrapping presents and holding tight to gift receipts for returns and exchanges.

“I see Jesus in you.” That’s a gift I could give to each of you... and I need to say it to you more often so that it becomes part of you, and how you see yourselves... so you know that you are blessed.

This can be a harsh season for people who are alone, grieving, struggling, or simply breathing. Somehow Christmas, the celebration of Jesus, born to save us, to set us free from sin and self-centeredness, to redeem our brokenness, became the season of consumerism and massive retail madness. It’s probably impossible, futile to resist... because it’s become our cultural story. But things can’t be bought or sold to fill the human heart. So week after week in Advent we come back to this simple

little scene in the crèche of Mary, and Joseph, and the shepherds, and the angel, and the wise men, and the manger that's waiting for the Baby Jesus.

I wish Elizabeth was here too. I picture her holding Mary's hands, tears running down their faces, as she tells Mary how blessed she is! As soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's voice, Elizabeth's baby (who would be John the Baptist) leaped for joy within her. Elizabeth was past childbearing years and faced her own fears, giving birth as an older woman, wanting to live to see her child grow up. And yet Elizabeth saw the joy of the situation, and possibly the humor too, that God had chosen a very old woman and a very young woman to birth into the realm of humanity, two men who would change the world: John the Baptist and Jesus the Christ.

Elizabeth was able to see God in this impossible situation. "To be a Christian is to believe in the impossible." This might have been the gift of her old age... it might have just been who Elizabeth was... like Mary, like Joseph, Elizabeth was chosen by God because of her faith, because she was practiced in the art of listening and looking for God.

Elizabeth conveyed to Mary, "I see God in this situation." That's not always true for me, at least not at first. When I go to the hospital, or the bedside, or sit with someone who's gotten devastating news I'm initially afraid. I'm afraid that God won't show up, that it'll only be me, trying to comfort, trying to make sense, trying to hold hope and faith. I'm not proud of that... that little toehold of doubt I give the devil, that maybe God won't be there when and where God is most needed. But what I know, what I've experienced, is that God is always already here. God is with us. Jesus was called Emmanuel, and it means... God-with-us.

It's not always appropriate to say to someone, grieving, in pain, or suffering, "I see God in this situation." But it is a gift to say, "I will look for God... for God's peace, God's comfort and healing... for God's justice and rightness... I will have faith for you... I look with you for God's love." Elizabeth told her young cousin, "You are blessed! I see Jesus in you! I see God at work in this messy situation!" And Mary, hearing these words of comfort and hope from her soul-friend... burst into song. Mary's song is called the Magnificat, which is Latin for the first words of her song, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

Mary sang, and she stayed with Elizabeth for three months, possibly to help Elizabeth deliver her own child. And then strengthened for the journey ahead; the journey to Bethlehem... the journey that would eventually lead her Son to the cross... Mary went home. Mary is here, in the crèche, waiting, as we are, for the coming of Jesus. Mary was able to take the journey as the mother, and later as a follower, of Christ because she had a soul-friend, Elizabeth. In the crèche, Mary is the contemplative, her hands folded across her heart. Joseph is the guardian, holding a staff or a lamp. If Elizabeth were there I think she would hold out one hand, the hand of friendship, and hold up the other hand pointing to heaven. This is the pose of the soul-friend: [hand held out] I see Jesus in you. [hand held up] And I see God in this situation.

Thank You, God, for the people You chose to be part of Jesus' story. Thank You that You still choose people... You choose us... to continue to tell His story. Today especially, Lord, we thank You for Mary's soul-friend, Elizabeth. Amen.