

## “Welcome”

*“Prepare The Way” Advent 2018 – part #4*

Luke 1:39-55

There is nothing like the excitement of expecting your first child. I will bet that many of you, even if you are grandparents now, can remember the doubts, questions, wonder and anticipation that went through your mind, or the mind of someone you know. Of course, today, with advanced ultrasound equipment, it is possible not only to know the sex of your child, but even to have its face scanned, but not too long ago, everything about your firstborn was wrapped in mystery.

Katja and I wanted to relish the experience of our firstborn. We told the doctor not to tell us whether we were having a boy or a girl. Emily was not only the first grandchild on both sides of the family, she was the first great-grandchild for all her surviving great-grandparents. So clearly there was a lot of excitement swirling around her birth.

Katja and I knew there was a lot of work to be done to get ready to welcome our first child. For me, that meant reading a book titled, “What to Expect When Your Wife is Expanding,” hilarious and practical. For her, it meant plotting and sometimes commiserating with her friend Autumn, whose daughter ended up being born the day before Emily. There is something about two pregnant women meeting that guys just don’t understand. They talk about names, compare notes on doctors and due dates, and argue the various benefits of cloth versus disposable diapers – cloth diapers rule, by the way. But there was a connection between them, a joy and excitement that could be shared only between women on such a momentous occasion. Have you seen it? It really is astounding. And it doesn’t just occur for the firstborn. My sister-in-law was

pregnant around the same time we were expecting Jonah. In fact, ironically, my niece was born six months before Jonah, which is about the same interval between Mary and Elizabeth in our scripture today.

This is more than a story of two simple women meeting for coffee to discuss the pros and cons of childbearing. We forget how audacious this story really is. In fact, sometimes, it just seems like a fairy tale to us. When we get caught up in the Christmas rush, shopping, baking, decorating, and planning, we forget how amazing this story really is, and in the words of Sue Mink (who wrote the Advent devotions I gave to the whole church), “Jesus’ birth becomes just a charming little story, complete with angels, shepherds, and a star.” Mary and Elizabeth can help us break out of that stagnation.

It’s easy to forget that Mary and Elizabeth were not part of the privileged class. Mary, a peasant girl from the small town of Nazareth, and Elizabeth, the old wife of a second-rate priest, are not high and mighty, famous women. They are poor and simple. Yet even before he was born, Jesus was already changing the lives of these two women dramatically.

Both of these women faced impossible pregnancies. Elizabeth’s husband, Zachariah, who was also up there in years, was visited by the angel Gabriel while presenting the offering in the temple. Zachariah was so shocked by the announcement that they would have a child that he flat-out told the angel he didn’t believe it. Zachariah was stricken mute for nine months, and when John finally was born, Zachariah offered his praise and thanks to God.

Mary, on the other hand, was shocked and slightly terrified by her visit from the angel, but she at least had the faith to believe him. In fact, her only question underscored her presence of mind and humility. She asked, “How can

this happen if I am still a virgin?” That’s it. No concern for herself, her reputation, her soon-to-be-husband’s reaction, or even how they could afford a baby.

Elizabeth was very unlikely to get pregnant because of her age, but at least she was already married! Mary was still a virgin, which meant her pregnancy was even more miraculous. What a contrast, that the peasant girl showed more faith than the priest!

Both of these women received startling revelations of how God was going to change the world, and, like every good friend or relative, they got together to share this strange, joyful news. The scripture says Mary “hurried” to see Elizabeth, not just to prove what the angel told her was true, but to meet her elder cousin and help her in the last trimester. She knew something big was happening. God was moving. Mary could not keep this to herself. I wonder, though, as Mary stood at the door prepared to knock, if she hesitated, for just a moment, and thought, “What is Elizabeth going to say?” I wonder if Mary expected a different reaction from Elizabeth than what she got.

The conversation they had at the door was very strange, if you ask me. If this story had happened today, the conversation would have played out more like this:

Elizabeth: Mary! What are you doing here?

Mary: I heard you were pregnant, and I came to see you. By the way, I’m pregnant, too, and no, Joseph hasn’t married me, yet.

Elizabeth: What? You’re pregnant, too? Are you crazy?

Mary: I was about to ask you the same thing.

And you thought you had weird relatives!

OK, so that's not what Luke says happened. What did these two women do when they came together? They shared joy. Elizabeth proclaimed in a loud voice that the mother of her Lord had come to greet her. She was humbled and blessed Mary, noting that the child within her leaped for joy at the sound of Mary's voice. Mary, in turn, broke into song, praising God.

I am struck by the humility both of these women show, but especially Elizabeth. As the elder cousin by a significant margin, she should have expected to receive respect and honor from Mary. Instead, Elizabeth is humbled by Mary's visit. Elizabeth never doubted that Mary's pregnancy was a miracle. Clearly Elizabeth could see Mary's faithfulness and obedience.

When the mother of God shows up on your doorstep, wouldn't there be just a little twinge of jealousy? If your unwed, younger niece showed up at your doorstep unexpectedly, with dubious news, would you not have a much stronger, maybe negative reaction?

Elizabeth knows that Mary is blessed by God. She says so. And Elizabeth practices radical hospitality when Mary shows up. Elizabeth blesses Mary and honors her. She says, "But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Luke 1:43. Elizabeth praises Mary. Mary, in turn, praises God.

Mary pours out her heart to God in the song called the Magnificat. She exclaims that God lifts up the lowly and rescues his people. One of my commentaries has this intriguing thought: Depending on your status in society, Mary's song might not be good news.<sup>1</sup> Listen to these three verses again:

---

<sup>1</sup> Abingdon New Testament Commentary, Luke 1.

"[God] has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.  
He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.  
He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty." (Luke 1:51-53)

This is not good news for the rich. This is not good news for those who are consumed by possessions and status. If you expect others to wait on you and serve you, the Magnificat is not good news. But if you are poor and lowly, if you understand, like Mary and Elizabeth, that it is only by the grace of God that you have anything, then this news is the best thing you have ever heard.

The Christmas story in Luke is a lot different than Matthew. Matthew focuses on Joseph, King Herod, and the wise men. Important people. Men. Luke, however, shows us that the most important figures in God's kingdom are the ones we often overlook. The poor. The women. They are the ones who receive honor from God.

We should take note that both of these women shared with each other out of the blessings they received from God. Elizabeth practiced radical hospitality to Mary. Mary, in turn, helped Elizabeth through the last and most difficult part of her pregnancy. Both of these women could have become arrogant. After all, they were the recipients of miracles, of visits from angels, directly or indirectly. They could have expected others to bow down to them, the mothers of a great prophet and the Son of God. But they didn't. They praised God and served each other.

I can't get pregnant, but I can receive a message from God. I can expect miracles. And I can interact with the Christmas story as if for the first time, hearing the ache in God's heart that we would welcome each other with grace and kindness, that we would lift up the cause of the poor and oppressed, that we

would see in the story of Mary and Elizabeth the reactions we should have when Jesus visits us in the form of an unexpected or surprising person.

Because of this story and other things I have learned over the years, our family has started the recent tradition of giving Jesus a gift for his birthday. We give a tangible gift each year to help the poor and victims of disasters. As cool as it is to buy gifts for our family members, we all need to remember that we are rich beyond comparison to most of the people in the world, and the story of Christmas is supposed to be good news to the poor. How we receive strangers in our midst is exactly how we receive Jesus himself. If you don't believe me, read Matthew 25 again.

As I often remind the church, we are all in this together. Part of my deepest longing is for all people to realize that. At Christmastime, a lot of people return to church looking for something: fond memories of childhood, familiar music, familiar stories. My deepest wish is that we would welcome them with radical hospitality, as we should all year-round. Together, we could learn that God cares deeply for the plight of the poor and oppressed, and the Christmas story is not just about us having an excuse to engage in materialism, but remembering the importance of lowly people like Mary and Elizabeth in God's plan of salvation for the world.

We should all feel the kick of the baby, figuratively. The joy these two women shared can be our joy as well. If we welcome others, we welcome Christ. When we open up our hearts to the poor, we open our hearts to Christ. God is moving among us, just as he did nearly two thousand years ago. Will we receive this message or ignore it?

Jesus changes lives. The Christmas story must surprise us again. Sue Mink says, "Quite simply, if the birth of this baby does not alter us, then we have not allowed the transforming grace of Jesus Christ to truly enter our lives."

Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord." Does your soul do that? Do your actions make God bigger for the world to see him? Tomorrow night we again welcome the Christ child. But the service will only be empty words and meaningless songs if we do not let the truth of this season impact us and change us the way it did Mary and Elizabeth. We are called to practice radical hospitality, to welcome all to the manger, to the church, and to God's kingdom. We must do as Elizabeth did, throw open the door to the unexpected, receive the other person with joy, and praise God.

May you share the joy of the unexpected this Christmas and open your eyes to the miracles God is doing all around us. May you practice radical hospitality, welcoming Christ as you welcome others. And may all of us deflect our praise and glory to God, the author of this great and marvelous story.

**Memory Verse: Luke 1:46-47**

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

**Reflection Questions:**

1. Luke 1:47-55 is known as Mary's Magnificat. What actions does Mary ascribe to God? What emotions surface as you read the Magnificat?
2. How would the news from the angel Gabriel to Mary (Luke 1:26-31) have been unwelcome news for Mary? How would Elizabeth's response to Mary have been welcome?
3. How do Elizabeth and Mary embody faithful discipleship? How do their actions help prepare the way for others?
4. How is God calling you to be like Elizabeth or Mary this week?

*Source: <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/advent-christmas-epiphany-2018-19-worship-planning-series/december-23-fourth-sunday-of-advent-year-c/fourth-sunday-of-advent-2018-year-c-faith-formation>*