

Sermon: December 12, 2021 – Luke 1: 26-45 Advent III C

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

The annunciation to Mary, followed by the visitation of Mary and Elizabeth. These are our back-to-back gospel readings from Luke for this third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of JOY.

Watch at <https://youtu.be/BZBuymSiMec>

The second scene, of young Mary and her much older kinswoman Elizabeth, is a scene particularly bathed in joy, yet it is with some trepidation that I attempt to unpack what is going on here; for I am hindered both by cultural practices that I do not understand very well, and the embodied experience of two pregnant women, which I can make no claim to understanding at all. With those caveats, and with a handful of wise women assisting my efforts, we forge ahead:

My focus today is mostly on Elizabeth and Mary, but it does follow on the heels of the scene up in Nazareth of young Mary and the angel Gabriel. What is spoken in this scene, is the proclamation or “annunciation” of an impossible happening: Mary, a virgin, is going to have a child. There is the ominous, eerie talk of the Holy Spirit coming and overshadowing her and amidst the shock and impossibility of such a thing, Mary manages to find a yes, saying (v.38) “I am the Lord’s servant/handmaid; may your word to me be fulfilled.”

That is what is spoken, but what is unspoken is explained to me by Religious Studies professor Elizabeth Fletcher: “the young Galilean woman Mary had been betrothed to Joseph of Nazareth with a formal witnessed agreement, legally binding, between the families of the young people, and a bride price paid to Mary’s family. It was expected that the formal marriage would take place about a year later, when Mary would be taken to the home of Joseph’s family to live.

“Accustomed as we are to benign images of the Annunciation, and of Mary and Joseph with the baby Jesus, we tend to blot out the reality of the situation: of the young girl by her fiancé’s family. Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, about a hundred miles away in Judea, may have been a desperate attempt by her family to save her from this fate, to get her well out of the way until some solution had been worked out”.

As we encounter this Bible passage, are there objections to be raised here about patriarchy? Yes, there are, and it’s a situation that still arises far too often in our day, in nation after nation where men of the dominant culture have endless rights and privileges, while women’s rights are conditional-at-best, and we will be lifting those problems up in today’s prayers. If we imagine the situation through Mary’s eyes, though, there was but one urgent need and that was to get far, far away from Nazareth - at the moment the “bigger questions” were not questions for Mary to raise. Verses 39 and 40 reflect this urgency: “³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth”. She needed to get safe, some three or four days south of her, traditionally understood to be the town of Ein Karem.

Now, for those of you scratching your heads and wondering if I have forgotten that this is the Sunday of JOY, no, I haven’t. But as I spend time with this story it’s significant to

think of how the joy of the encounter between Elizabeth and Mary gets shaped and even amplified by this danger. It is unclear whether Elizabeth was Mary's cousin or her aunt, but one way or another it seems that her family knew that if anyone in the extended family was capable of providing safe harbour – and an understanding ear – and some physical distance from the inevitable anger - it would be Elizabeth.

Artist, Writer and United Methodist Minister Jan L Richardson describes it like so: “The archangel Gabriel has extended his astounding invitation. Mary has given her astonishing yes. Now she is alone—suddenly, entirely, dangerously alone—save for the unlikely child she now carries. She flees: toward her kinswoman, toward refuge, toward sanctuary. In the home of Elizabeth, in the company of her cousin who is herself pregnant in most unusual circumstances, Mary finds what she most needs. Elizabeth gathers and enfolds her. Welcomes her. Blesses her. [And] In response to Elizabeth's blessing, Mary sings.” That song, the Magnificat, Luke 1: 46-55, will be our scripture reading next Sunday, though we're hearing a few musical renditions of it this morning, and that song (again quoting Jan Richardson) “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”.

Seeking safety, Mary receives so much more. She is enfolded, she is blessed, she is empowered to sing her song of faith, a song intertwined with the stories and songs of her forebears, Miriam, Deborah, Judith, and Hannah [as outlined by Amy Smith Carman]. In the midst of threat, the presence and brave welcome she receives in the household of Elizabeth and Zechariah, helps Mary find her footing and her voice. And therein, I would say, resides a particular kind of joy: not just joy-as-an-outpouring-of-happiness, but an existential joy. Psychologist Patty Van Cappellen writes, “I suggest that joy connects us to our core identity, values, and priorities. It is the emotion that makes life worth living in the moment” and it is that kind of deep, meaningful joy that is unleashed when Mary escapes danger and has the breathing room to muse on what all this might mean for her and for a much bigger picture.

In addition to *this* joy, the joy of being grounded in the justice-seeking love of God, there is one more expression of joy in this scripture, spoken of in verse 41 as Mary enters her safe house: “⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.” We recall from the overall story here, that Elizabeth's child, John, is to be the herald of Mary's child, Jesus, and it's intentional in Luke's writing that from their very first in utero encounter, John springs into action in the presence of this holy cousin. But beside that theological musing there is something so earthy, so sisterly here, as these two mothers-to-be share space. Elizabeth had borne decades of scorn and shame and disappointment; Mary's experience is more recent and more dangerous, but the scorn and shame are somewhat parallel to the experience of her kinswoman.

Turning once more to expertise where I have none, I wondered how this Biblical description of John leaping in the womb aligns with the experience of “quickenings” – and learned, from childbirth educator Genevieve Howland, that “Some women describe [quickenings] as the fluttering of a butterfly or an angel’s wing, [or] as a tumbling or twitching sensation.” In a broad general sense, quickening happens somewhere between the 16th and 25th week of pregnancy – typically a bit toward that later date for first time moms. So while the gospel writer was most definitely not writing a medical textbook here, Elizabeth – six months along, right around that 25 week mark – feels the little one leaping in her womb, confirming that all is well with the pregnancy and, in a theological sense, all is well in the unfolding of the bigger narrative of the stories of John and Jesus, and God’s desire to reconcile & to save people from the circumstances they are in.

And once again, in addition to what we do read here, there is much going on between the lines. Episcopal Vicar Judith Jones writes, “Women — so often overlooked or ignored both in society at large and in biblical narratives — have the only speaking roles in this vignette. Mary’s first words prompt an immediate, silent, response from Elizabeth’s unborn child. John leaps, acknowledging both her presence and the significance of the child she carries in her womb. ... Elizabeth, John’s mother, takes on the role of prophet by speaking the prophetic word in this scene: she is filled with the Holy Spirit and proclaims what Mary has not yet told her, and what is not yet visible to the eye: Mary is pregnant. Furthermore, through the Spirit she knows who Mary’s child will be, for she calls Mary “the mother of my Lord.” Her prophecy will soon be fulfilled when her own son prepares the way for the Lord.”

What a range of roles Elizabeth plays in this story! Confidante, guardian, wise elder, facilitator, catalyst, prophet, sister in pregnancy. Yes, I am well aware of the poetic license taken by Luke in this tale of angels and secret knowledge and poetry, and the limitations of a narrative that knows far too much about the future; but in the midst of all this there is a rugged, earthy expression of two women in challenging circumstances, finding one another - and through that relationship, finding what God has for them and in them and from them and between them. As she so often does, Jan L Richardson sums it up eloquently, with these words and two questions: “The blessing that Elizabeth speaks and enacts through her words, her welcome, her gift of sanctuary: such a blessing has the power to help us, like Mary, speak the word we most need to offer. Such a blessing gives us a glimpse of the redemption that God, in God’s strange sense of time, has somehow already accomplished. Such a blessing stirs up in us the strength to participate with God in bringing about this redemption in *this* time, in *this* world.
 - Where will we go, like Mary, to find and receive such a blessing?
 - How will we open our heart, like Elizabeth, to offer it?”

And rather than finding some additional way to tie things up in this sermon and put a bow on it, I step back and leave you with Jan’s questions. In this story of that is both ancient and unsettlingly contemporary, a story of danger and sanctuary, of possibility and impossibility, of unexpected companionship, a blessing is expressed. It might be

expressed to us, it might be expressed through us, perhaps both, but we are left with these same questions:

“Where will we go, like Mary, to find and receive such a blessing?”

“How will we open our heart, like Elizabeth, to offer it?”

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