

LEAPS AND BOUNDS

Preached by Rev. Jacob Bolton
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, VA
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Luke 1:35-56

The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

When it became clear that I was going to be preaching on the third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday on which we light the pink candle of joy, I was thrilled to be presented with this section of New Testament gold, Elizabeth and Mary, two women, both great with child, bonding and caring for one another, and the emotionally stunning Magnificat. It is not that often in our sacred text that we explore encounters between two women, especially encounters between two women with dialogue. It is also not common for us to witness characters in our sacred story burst into song. Yet both of those holy signifiers shine forth from the page like the Advent candles we just lit indicating that something special, something unique, something full of Advent joy is present here.

However, given these distinctive signifiers I was remiss at my first reading of this text to see a few things that struck me as odd. Now I am not saying the Bible story here is wrong, just that I didn't necessarily understand how certain pieces fit. As Peter Enns, author of our Desert and Dialogue common reading book *How the Bible Actually Works*, says, "When we open the Bible and read it, we are eavesdropping on an ancient spiritual journey," and so these stories don't always make clear sense, at least to me, without further exploration. For instance, I don't buy that with Elizabeth being six months pregnant, Mary invites herself over, moves in for three months, and then leaves right before John is set to be born? $3 + 6 = 9$ right? I understand that with both of these women expecting their first child, the advent of their motherhood was very new; but was Mary really that uncomfortable with the idea of birth. Clearly this section of the Bible was written by a guy.

But then I remember that yes, this was written by a guy . . . and that guy was Luke. Why does Luke mention three months? If Luke was a beloved physician, as Paul claims, he would surely know that the first three months are a most vulnerable time of any pregnancy. Vulnerable now in 2019, and even more so during the time of Elizabeth and Mary. A large percentage of miscarriages happen in the first trimester, and many women choose not to share news of their pregnancy until the first three months have passed. This is a holy time.

Dr. Luke would also know about morning sickness. While everybody is different, morning sickness is most common during those same first three months. For the majority of women, the body adjusts to the rush of changes by the end of the first trimester, and morning sickness goes away. This has resulted in modern times the concept of a “baby-moon” taking place during the second trimester, that “in between” time when morning sickness is hopefully over and when mobility has become “not too difficult.” It seems that Mary hastens to reach Elizabeth before morning sickness can have a chance to seriously hinder her travels. I wonder if she ends up staying three months because it takes that long before she feels well enough to make the return trip back to Nazareth. For many women, morning sickness is 24/7 sickness.

Along these lines, author and Lutheran Pastor Heidi Neumark in commenting on this section of the Bible writes that, “In Spanish the term for morning sickness is malabarriga, or “evil belly.” Mary’s revolutionary Magnificat comes to us out of these three months of malabarriga, a time of churning upheaval in her body and in the social body she was part of. We can imagine her anxiety and uncertainty, the gossip swirling around her, leaving her vulnerable to the miscarriage of justice, the threat of community rejection and possible death.

All this is taking place at Elizabeth’s home in Judea, a Roman colony under the rule of Herod—a narcissistic tyrant known for his cruelty and massive building projects including housing, palaces, and an enormous wall, which my hunch is all of you traveling to Israel in a few months will have the honor of seeing. Mary’s entire world was about to “turn,” and it was, and is, enough to give anyone, even us reading today, a bad case of malabarriga. Perhaps it is safer to stay in the sanctuary of Elisabeth’s home than to risk the dangers of the road.

But remain there for three months and still not stay for the birth of John? Well, then I remember that it is likely that the author Luke also wrote the Acts of the Apostles and throughout the full body his storytelling, the phrase “three months” is always such a generative time. In Acts, Luke tells us that Paul stays in Ephesus for three months and speaks boldly to the people there. Then Paul stays in Greece for three months of sanctuary, a safe place in the face of violent plots against him. Later, after the ship carrying him to Rome to stand trial is wrecked in a storm, Paul and his captors stay on the island of Malta for three months, another season of sanctuary and preparation for what is to come.

And so, the very young Mary seeks out her older cousin Elizabeth, who is in her sixth month, for a safe space, sanctuary, a place of preparation, and the opportunity to speak boldly during a time when many were against her. We understand that Mary needs Elizabeth—but let us not miss the truth that Elizabeth here also needs Mary. These miraculous mothers act as foils and compliments throughout our reading. Their names establish them as daughters of Israel with shared illustrious lineage. Elizabeth is married, advanced in years and has longed for a child; Mary is young, only just engaged, and has not longed for a child. By the human standards of the day neither qualify for motherhood – and yet by divine intervention, both become co-creators with God.

But now that we know a bit more about why three months, other than sharing “leaping babies in the womb” moments, I wonder what happened during their three-month sanctuary time together.

In *Just a Sister Away*, renowned Hebrew Scholar Renita Weems wonders about this special time Mary and Elizabeth spent together as well. She writes:

What the two women talked about, we can only imagine. No doubt they shared stories about the changes their bodies were undergoing. They probably touched one another’s protruding bellies and massaged one another’s swollen feet. They certainly laughed and cried and reminisced and dreamed. And they most likely imagined the kinds of men their sons would grow up to be. The two women shared with one another things they could never share with the men in their lives. They held on to one another for dear life. They were women trying to grapple with the hand of God in their lives, sharing with each other the blessedness’s and the burdensomeness of being blessed.

Two great women, both great with child, great with hope, and because of their time spent together, great with joy. One blessing is the answer to prayer, the other blessing is the acceptance of her mission with all of the mystery, complexity and uncharted territory it was bound to bring. Their souls both magnify the Lord; and calls them into song.

Which leads me to the second component. Singing. Both Elisabeth and Mary here sing with and to one another. Mary's Magnificat has a long-standing reputation throughout church history, and certainly echoes back to her spiritual sisters in song, Miriam and Hannah. Of course, only a chapter later in Luke we have the story of Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband and father of John the Baptist, who bursts into song after a long silence, indicating that song, especially in this gospel is very important. But I am remiss to say that not long after Mary sings these words that have echoed down throughout history, we do not hear much more from her again. According to Luke, her last spoken words are officially in chapter two, of a Lukan account that remember spans both the book of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. For instance, Luke does not place Mary at the crucifixion and does not include her among the women that are named the morning of the resurrection. Mary is present in Jerusalem in that unique in between time after Jesus Ascension and before Pentecost, the babymoon period of this story, if you will, but still has no speaking role.

For Luke, who some scholars feel is an important gospel writer because of his "inclusion of women throughout" leaves both Mary and Elisabeth silent pretty much once their children are born. I struggle with this; I struggle that Luke, though yes, including women more often than any other gospel writer, always places these women in his account in subordinate roles. Throughout his gospel Luke still uses the Greek term "doulos" which is translated as servant or slave to describe every female character, while the men are given the more glowing term, translated as "disciple." I weep for the numerous people in our sacred texts whose voices are silent. I weep for the people who, through no fault of their own, live in a world where their needs are not met because of their social position. I am remiss to give Luke credit when he silences the women with whom God has chosen to help co-create a new era.

And then again, I remember that, according to Biblical Scholar Phyllis Trible, an inability to speak, the act of being silenced, is a marker of two things in scripture. First, it is used as a punishment for a lack of belief. Clearly neither Mary nor Elisabeth lack in their belief, Elisabeth prayed for her newfound reality and Mary, when given the choice, opted in for this sacred motherhood mystery. Which means it must be the second reason, which according to Trible is a "sign of the authentication" and significance of their faith. Can this text be read, that Elisabeth and Mary speak here, sing here, and nowhere else, in the Luke-Acts account, because of how vital their story actually is?

What if their story is so important, not because they are both "blessed," but because they are both women, both modeling the sacred cycle of faith for us all. The way I've come to read this text is we encounter two women talking, singing, and cherishing their time together, providing a model of church for the rest of eternity. Elizabeth privileges the younger Mary's pregnancy. Elizabeth prioritizes Mary's immediate need for hospitality and sanctuary. Perhaps most importantly, Elizabeth shows a preferential option for Mary's voice and vision over even her own. The Lord is magnified through Elizabeth's welcome, grace, and deference. And yet the Lord too is magnified through Mary's faith in Elizabeth, her trust in the love and support she will find there.

The underlying story of today friends is that we have Elizabeth, longing to be a mother is learning how to be a mother, and teaching Mary who never asked to be a mother, how to be a mother. Mary and Elizabeth mother the future, carry the future together: "According to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham [and Sarah] and to [their] descendants forever." In God's mercy, one generation needs the other. This is the story of a struggle with joy, the promise of new beginnings, and the wonder of family.

This model, the model which Elisabeth provides Mary, which Mary provides Jesus, which Jesus provides the church, is the model which the church provides for the world. Today we do not see two women preparing the

way of the Lord, we see two women demonstrating, embodying, how we should all prepare for the profound things the Holy Spirit is doing with, in, through, and despite of us all.

Allow me to close by sharing a story from Susan Guthrie in her marvelous text “Praying the Hours:”

Singing the Magnificat at Vespers, I see the just-pregnant Mary after she has walked a three day journey from Galilee to the Judean hills near Jerusalem and entered the house of Elizabeth. Mary observes her cousin’s body swollen with life on her aged frame . . . And while Elizabeth’s baby leaps in her womb, Mary suddenly “gets it.” There Elizabeth lies upon her mat, with swollen feet and ankles, uncomfortable, small back pain, restricted bladder. . .but now it is real. Now I get it. Now I understand what the angel meant. Now I see the miracle of incarnation. The Lord magnifies my soul so I can perceive this light I bear . . Two women, one carrying a child touched by the Holy Spirit who will baptize with water, another carrying the unborn Holy Spirit who will baptize with fire; two women carrying the light inside themselves in the time of darkness. The miracle is not the Incarnation of God through the working of the Holy Spirit, the miracle is the ordinary body, yours and mine, carrying this marvelous incarnate light.”

Ordinary bodies, yours and mine. May we all carry the light with joy. Amen.