

A Good Word from Elizabeth

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The First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ
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Luke 1:39-56

39In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." 46And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." 56And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

In our city, you may have noticed a young woman or two walking through our streets and through the doors of this church. You may know their story. You may not. But please know there is someone out there and in here who had to leave their home with some haste because there was a cloud over their situation. There is someone out there and in here who was running with the wrong crowd and needed to get away. There is someone out there and in here running from a church or a town or a sleepy bedroom community, or a relationship that offered a world-view that did not include them in its vision.

During this season of great anticipation, we discover that Mary also had a story. Her story was one of living on the margin. She was carrying a child before marriage. She was a virgin. A virgin in those days was another word for a younger teenage girl, only about 13 or 14. We don't know exactly why Mary left her hometown with haste. But it is likely she ran away for fear her friends would notice her pregnancy and shun her. It might have been too tough to go to the lunch room. You see Mary, in haste, went to a place that felt a little safer and a little more accepting where she could get a psychological break from the social stigma.

And where did Mary go? Mary went to be with her really hip aunt, Elizabeth, who was married to Zechariah. Elizabeth, of course, had her own story and her own struggles. She was an elderly woman. Many in society would have concluded that she should be beyond her child-bearing

years. Some might have thought it inappropriate for some one so old to be pregnant. But surprise, Elizabeth was carrying a child in her womb. The child, of course, was to become the great prophet John the Baptist. So while Mary might have labored under the stigma of a being in a tenuous marital situation because she was too young to have a child, Elizabeth was dealing with her own feelings of inadequacy that come with ageism. She was in the view of some, way too old to be a new mother.

Mary and Elizabeth remind us that we so often live with voices inside of deep judgment from people who do not understand. Out there and in here there you will find a Mary.

Actually there are more than a few Mary's in our world who had to get out of dodge and hastily ran to a place where they could find more acceptance and begin a new life. Can we confess, that many of us may feel as though our life script did not go according to the plan we had for ourselves? Or perhaps we have struggled to follow a plan we thought someone else had for us. But amidst the craziness and the wreckage of shattered expectations, the Bible tells us that Elizabeth offered a good word. Elizabeth was overcome with delight by Mary's greeting.

Mary needed Elizabeth's encouragement because she did not always feel that people were so delighted to see her. So it helped Mary a lot that Elizabeth was very delighted to be in Mary's presence. Elizabeth was so excited to see Mary that the child, little John, leaped in her womb with great joy. Elizabeth offered a powerful word of gratitude to Mary.

It was a very kind word of radical acceptance that pierced the midnight in Mary's young soul. Over a cup of tea in that funky living room in the house of Zechariah, aunt Elizabeth caressed Mary's hair, wiped her tears away, and said, these words Mary "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb". "Mary", Elizabeth said, "I see something in you that is so special, so beautiful, so divine, and so sacred". "Look", Elizabeth said to Mary, "you are not just any mother, but you are the mother of a child who will be Lord to me and all people."

As Mary pondered these words of Elizabeth in her young teenage heart, she wondered how she of all people would be an instrument of God. She surely struggled to comprehend how she hastily left a town with people who shunned her and now had her aging aunty telling her that she was to be an extraordinary mother who would give birth to the son of the God. Mary could not reconcile this truth in her mind. "Oh" she thought, "why is such extravagance offered to me when so many other people told me for so long that I was wrong and undeserving? I just can't believe it." But this is one story you can believe in. For you see, the gracious and loving God who we worship here, understands our situation. God understands that there is so much stress and complexity in our lives where we like Mary, can feel that we don't quite fit.

But as we feel weighed down with these impossible pictures of perfection in our heads to which we cannot measure up, Elizabeth and Mary, through their very human and imperfect story, teaches us that God comes to us in the cracks, in the hard spots, in the pain, and in the uncertainty and does something very beautiful. The good news of Christmas is that God sees something amazingly sacred, something extraordinary in the ordinary.

God sees something in us and in our world that is about to be born which we may not yet see. Through this story of the incarnation, God holds out a promise that our babies, no matter how they were brought into the world, and no matter what their race, physical attribute, or sexual orientation might be, have the power and the capacity to bring good news into our global community. In response to the grace she received, Mary had a vision which led her to sing a very

old song in a very new, fresh and lively way. My baby, Mary sang, will grow up and he will bring life to others that I have only begun to understand in my own life.

As John the Baptist danced in the elderly Elizabeth's womb, Mary dreamed of a child who would shower on the earth mercy and compassion for every generation. Mary sang about her baby who would grow up to bring down from their thrones those death dealing powers that diminish and cheapen our humanity.

She sang of a child who would lift up the lowly and bring food to the hungry. This is a child, who would be intoxicated with the power of God, who would have the courage to take on all those forces in the world which for far too many years marginalized Mary and Elizabeth and people like them because of their gender, their age and life circumstance.

This Christ child offers a new picture of love, grace and acceptance that would rock the whole earth. In our world today, we so often cower in fear. Our hearts are so broken by the ways in which violence, war, anger, greed, and discrimination are diminishing our personhood, our children and our seniors and all creation.

But in this season of Advent waiting, we rightfully long for that which is good and true and beautiful. We long to live into God's enduring promise of something new that is about to be born. So what ever your struggle might be, and what ever loose ends you are trying to tie up in your life, what ever earthly care weighs on your soul, and no matter how low you might feel, I invite you to listen for Elizabeth's powerful words of encouragement and promise.

And if you have experienced grace or if you have been encouraged by someone else on your life's journey, I invite you to share the gift. May Mary's song cultivate in you a holy impatience with greediness and selfishness which diminishes the giftedness and the goodness all the Mary's and Elizabeth's in our midst.

Through your words and actions, let the world know that in God's creation there is no junk, there is no person that is beyond God's redemption. We can all be vessels of God's grace. So as we near the manger and ponder the beauty of God, let us remember beautiful children who changed the world. Children born to a young girl or an old woman or any one in between.

May all of us be instruments of promise and goodness and always remember that God's redeeming grace breaks the chains of oppression and shatters all of our worldly categories to create a new home in which all of us can safely dwell. Amen.