

Our reading this morning is from the gospel of Luke. These are actually the verses that come just before the Magnificat which we read responsively.

Luke1:39-45

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."

Sermon December 13, 2009 - Susi Kawolics

This is a time of year when we are surrounded by stories and songs. On television we have the opportunity to watch the old Christmas favorites "Charlie Brown Christmas", "How the Grinch stole Christmas", "It's a Wonderful Life" and countless others. I bring up my collection of Christmas books that I put out every year, including titles such as Clement C. Moore's "The Night before Christmas" or Charles Dickens "A Christmas Carol." We hear entire radio stations that play nothing but holiday music from Thanksgiving through the end of December, and carols take up the largest section of most hymnals. As the central event in human history, the significance of the birth of Jesus compels people to find ways to express what this miraculous fulfillment of God's promise of salvation means to them. Each song and story gives us a different way to understand and unpack the unfathomable mystery of this event. Some stories and songs, like "The Little Drummer Boy" even use the actual nativity as their setting, imagining something that could have taken place there.

If I were ever to write a Christmas story, I think I would center it around Mary and Elizabeth, the main characters in today's gospel. This is one of my favorite Bible stories. It tells the tale of two women and how they react and interact after being given the news of God breaking into human history.

Let's consider Elizabeth first. She was thought to be barren, past the age of child-bearing possibilities when her husband, Zachariah, was visited by the angel Gabriel. Zachariah was a temple priest, and he was just getting ready to perform his duties when Gabriel came to him and announced that he and Elizabeth would have a child. This child would be great in the sight of God, filled with the Holy Spirit and destined to herald the coming of the Messiah. Zachariah's reaction to the message was something like this: "Do you expect me to believe this? I'm an old man and my wife is an old woman." (Eugene Petersen - The Message). Well, because of his doubt, Gabriel proclaimed that Zachariah will be mute until the child was born and given the name of John.

Immediately following this scene, we have the contrast of Gabriel's visit and announcement to Mary. She is in just the opposite circumstances from Elizabeth - being just at the start of her childbearing years. The angel announces to her that she will have a son, that she has been chosen to birth the Messiah, God's fulfillment of the promise of salvation. Mary is surprised, but her words of "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word" show her deep faith and trust. Gabriel also tells her that her cousin Elizabeth, who was thought to be barren, has conceived, and is

now in her sixth month of pregnancy. So Mary leaves to go visit her cousin. This is where we begin our story today.

What intrigues me most about the story is the relationship between these two women. Mary, on the one hand, although mature in her faith, is still a very young girl. I can only imagine that she had a million questions after the annunciation. She may even have wondered if the announcement and visit from the angel were real, or if they were just a dream. In those days, there were no pregnancy tests, blood tests or ultrasounds. How would she know if what she heard proclaimed had truly happened to her?

She had to have been worried and anxious as well. If what the angel said was true, what would happen to her? Being an unmarried pregnant woman at that time was a huge concern – both religiously and socially. She risked not only disapproval or shunning at the least, but also banishment from her community.

With all this on her mind, Mary goes to visit her cousin. In addition to being relatives, they must have also been very close friends. Mary had just had a spiritual experience that would change her life. Whom would she go to but someone older and wiser whom she trusted and loved?

When Mary arrived, Elizabeth could have reacted in a number of ways. She could have judged Mary harshly, according to Jewish law. She could have turned her out. Also, Elizabeth was a woman at the end of her child-bearing years. She had spent her life being judged by others who wondered what sin she had committed, because God had not given her a child all these years. In those days, it was believed that barrenness in a woman was punishment for sins. She must have asked herself why God had let her suffer for so long. When Mary appeared, pregnant at such a young age, jealousy could certainly have been a natural emotion for Elizabeth.

And yet, her reaction is just the opposite. As soon as Elizabeth sees her, she confirms that what Mary had experienced was indeed real. She acts contrary to tradition as she accepts Mary unconditionally, even joyfully. She affirms her faith and encourages her. What relief, comfort and peace Mary must have gotten from Elizabeth.

Scripture tells us that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months. In my story, I would write about these two deeply spiritual women, both with unexpected pregnancies, sharing their thoughts and dreams and just enjoying each others' company as they visited together. I would imagine that they continued this close relationship after their boys were born. After all, they were cousins, and their sons, Jesus and John the Baptist, were both special children. Did Mary call Elizabeth exasperated saying "I keep trying to give little Jesus a bath, but all he wants to do is walk on the water!" and Elizabeth answer, "I know – I get so frustrated trying to feed John healthy things, when all he wants to eat are locusts and honey!" Perhaps their husbands, Joseph and Zachariah developed a friendship as well. They were both raising sons who were so different, who were not destined to follow in their fathers' footsteps as was so common in those days. There is no biblical information about this, but I think by imagining the lives of these scriptural characters, we can take the stories and understand how they might apply to our lives today.

Mary and Elizabeth speak to us about the nature of true friendship. Real friends accept us as we are, without passing judgment on us. When they have to say something, they speak the truth in love. They offer us encouragement, support, and a sense that we are worthwhile human beings. They are simply there for us, opening wide their homes and their hearts. Friends help us to hope no matter how dark a situation may seem.

Mary and Elizabeth show us that we are not meant to travel our spiritual paths alone. God, through the Holy Spirit, leads us to friends, to family members and to Church communities who support us and affirm us as we journey towards becoming all that God wants us to be. These companions are essential to us, supporting us as we live our call to be God's Word in this world.

Spiritual friends actually speak the word of God to each other. Think of the words that Elizabeth spoke to Mary – these came directly from God. The story of Christ's birth is a story of God's incarnation – which means literally to take flesh. I believe that our friends become the Word of God enfleshed for us, God's presence made real for us, as God's presence was made real in Christ.

This is the reason church is referred to as "The Body of Christ." We are to be for each other a Christ-like presence – to speak loving, healing and encouraging words to each other. Mary and Elizabeth's friendship represents for us the qualities of good church community. Elizabeth's words of welcome to Mary are words of praise to God – she proclaims: "Why am I so favored, that the mother of the Messiah should come to me?" When we gather for worship as a church community, we come to praise God as well, and thank God for our blessings.

Mary and Elizabeth also broke bread together while visiting. They shared the stuff of everyday life, nourishing each other physically as well as spiritually. As a community of faith, we also break bread together. We share meals, both in this space around the Communion table, after church and in social settings. We nourish each other, both in body and spirit.

Mary and Elizabeth were bound together by belief in the word of God – each trusting in the promise of the coming Messiah. We are a community that also gathers around the word of God, the promise of hope. In the name of Jesus, who is the fulfillment of this promise, we accept each other, forgive each other, and offer our presence and care to each other.

Let us, as a church community, continue to follow the example set by these two holy women. May we move forward in hope, believing in the promise of God's salvation. May we offer each other encouragement, friendship and love as we continue to journey toward the celebration of the birth of our Savior and beyond. And may we praise the God of our salvation who brings us from despair to hope, from anxiety to peace, from death into life.

Amen.