

## Mary says, "Yes!"

Sermon by Lisa Crismore

John Knox Presbyterian Church – December 20, 2015

Luke 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 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.

This last Tuesday my parents said good-bye to their Peruvian daughter, Shivi and her new husband, Roberto. The newlyweds, who now live in Italy, had been visiting with our family for 3 weeks. We had a party for them to celebrate and give our blessings for their wedding which took place in October. Shivi was first welcomed into my parent's home 30 years ago as a foreign exchange student through the Lion's Club program. She only stayed 5 weeks. But that is all it took for her to consider herself part of the family. As an outsider looking in, it may seem odd that my parents have had over 30-some people like Shivi who many call my parents "mom and dad". I have learned throughout my life time that it is the unconditional love and hospitality that my parents have shown them which gives them the comfort that they are welcome as part of our family.

As we enter into the home stretch of Advent, we look with excitement to celebrate Christmas with family and friends this week. My prayer is that we will all welcome or be welcomed into someone's home with unconditional love and hospitality as we celebrate the birth of God's Son. Today, we light the fourth Advent candle which stands for love.

It seems only fitting that we read the story of Mary being welcomed into the home of her cousin Elizabeth. Mary has hastily made her way there. She has received news from the angel Gabriel that by the power of the Holy Spirit Mary is pregnant with God's Son. She is God's favored child. Even though Mary has said, "Yes" to God, I can't help but wonder how terrified Mary was about this news.

I remembered there was a teenage girl who got pregnant while my husband and I were members at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church some 29 years ago. She was a member of our youth group. I am sure she was scared to tell her single-parent mother. What would she say and how would she react? How would she be treated by the teachers and students at her school? How would the church react to the news? I am sure it was a shock! But once the news was out, it was apparent that her loving mother was going to support her in the decision to keep the baby. She wanted to stand by her daughter and her

grandchild and care for them and love them with whatever lied ahead. It was the church's response that was interesting. One group in the church that typically hosted wedding and baby showers refused to bless this young woman in this way. They made it clear that if we would give her a party that would condone her actions. Thank the Lord, not everyone in felt this way. People did step forward and welcomed this baby by throwing a wonderful party as a blessing for this young mother-to-be.

Mary was up against a lot worse than this teenage girl. Being engaged to Joseph and pregnant made her an outcast. What would her parents say? How would Joseph react to the news? What would the people in the small town of Nazareth do? This was something where she could be stoned to death by the social standards of those times.

So Mary flees to Elizabeth's home. In that place of sanctuary, Mary receives not only affirmation that she is carrying God's Son but also a blessing. It is the child in Elizabeth's womb, who leaps with joy at the presence of Mary and confirming the news of the Angel Gabriel. Mary finds what she needed the most. Elizabeth welcomes her and blesses her giving her the reassurance that all is going to be okay.

Mary in return for the affirmation and blessings answers with a song! In this magnificent song, Mary sings "yes, I am in!" She sings as she receives the blessing that Elizabeth is giving.

Jan Richardson writes this about Mary's song.

*Mary sings. And how she sings! She sings of a God who brings down the powerful, who lifts up the lowly, who fills the hungry with good things. Strangely, wonderful, 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 redemption and restoration of the world. O my friends, this is what a blessing has the power to do. The blessing that Elizabeth speaks and enacts through her words, her welcome, and 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 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? (<http://adventdoor.com/2015/12/14/advent-4-a-blessing-called-sanctuary/#sthash.8cCBuYVF.dpuf>.)*

I find it interesting that scripture tells us that Mary stayed 3 months. She needed that place of sanctuary to prepare her for what lied ahead. It was the need to bask in the blessings of Elizabeth before she could face the reality of the world. Elizabeth is so full of love for Mary. She probably experienced criticism and judgment from the town's people as she went years without being able to conceive a child. She put herself in Mary's shoes and opens up her heart to bless Mary. Mary in turn receives that blessing. This can be very powerful!

Back in September, I went back to Weight Watchers for oh, probably about the 100<sup>th</sup> time! That is an exaggeration but I can honestly I have lost the same 10-15 pounds over and over again. The thing I like about Weight Watchers is that you are always welcome to return and for me the meetings are so helpful. I love the leader at my meetings. Her name is Debbie and she is a Christian. She always says that she shouldn't share about her faith but she is honest to say that this is a very important part of her.

At the beginning of October, she shared that her brother had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. He was not given very much time as this was a very aggressive form of cancer. Debbie knew that there had been hard feelings between her brother and his son. They had not spoken for 7 years. They had been a huge wedge that had been driven into the soul of their relationship and this was all due to another person's actions. Debbie felt the call from God to write to her nephew. She wasn't sure if this was poking her nose in where it didn't belong but she felt God nudging her to approach her nephew to reconcile with his father. She urged him to do it soon. It took some time as the nephew pondered what to do. It was his wife that said he should trust his Aunt Debbie. So, he agreed to set-up a meeting to talk with his dad.

This was truly a God moment. As the son came to give blessings of forgiveness, his dad was there with open arms to receive the blessings. They were both able to talk over their differences with love and reconciliation. Several weeks after this, Debbie's brother died. The relationship with the father and his son had been restored! Yesterday, when I asked Debbie for permission to share her story, she shared that the blessings have not stopped there. The son is working things out with other members of the family. They are being reconnected by God's love which is needed even more as they deal with their sorrow and grief.

As we gather around the table and Christmas tree this next week, we will share with family and friends. Is there someone that has been heavy on your heart that is searching sanctuary? Are you or they searching in need of a blessing? Will there be room in our hearts to give that needed blessing? Sometimes it is difficult to receive a blessing. We think that we can do a task or solve a problem all on our own. Sometimes we have to let go of pride and humble ourselves to receive as well as to offer a blessing.

We give thanks to God as we celebrate the gift of love this Advent season! As we make our final journey to Bethlehem this week, may we be open to receiving and giving the love we find in that manger! Thanks be to God! Amen!

A Blessing Called Sanctuary – a poem by Jan Richardson from the book Circle of Grace  
You hardly knew how hungry you were to be gathered in, to receive the welcome that invited you to enter entirely – nothing of you found foreign or strange, nothing of your life that you were asked to leave behind or to carry in silence or in shame. Tentative steps became settling in, leaning into the blessing that enfolded you, and taking your place in the circle that stunned you with its unimagined grace. You began to breathe again, to move without fear, to speak with abandon the words you carried in your bones that echoed in your being. You learned to sing. But the deal with this blessing is that I will not leave you alone, will not let you linger in safety, in stasis. The time will come when this blessing will ask you to leave, not because it has tired of you but because it desires for you to become the sanctuary that you have found – to speak your word into the world, to tell what you have heard with your own ears, seen with your own eyes, known in your own heart; that you are beloved, precious child of God, beautiful to behold,” and you are welcome and more than welcome here. (<http://adventdoor.com/2015/12/14/advent-4-a-blessing-called-sanctuary/#sthash.8cCBuYVF.dpuf>.)