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 Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 1:38-55

LOVE

I went through some old boxes this weekend—it's something to do to avoid the sermon waiting on your word processor. Riffing through the contents, I came across a photograph from 1985. In it, I'm belly-button to belly-button with my sister-in-law. She is six months pregnant. I have the beginning of a baby-bump and we're laughing.

Hers was a hard-won pregnancy aided by modern medical science. Mine was unplanned, but not unwelcome, a lovely surprise that changed the trajectory of my life. I didn't remember this moment until I opened the box, but there it was in glorious Kodachrome—a fragment of family story, framed in the lives of two women.

Luke's gospel reading is also a snapshot—a moment carefully captured in his musical prose. Newly pregnant Mary has rushed to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth, who is indeed six-months pregnant with a boy named John. This is a fragment of our cosmic family story, also framed by women's lives.

They're an odd pair—Mary and Elizabeth—an adolescent girl and a post-menopausal woman, both “impossibly pregnant.”¹ Luke weaves the family story so that we will remember how Mary and Elizabeth take part in the redeeming narrative of God's steadfast love.

Like all good family stories—there is a particular sequence to its retelling—we must “get it right” to preserve the drama.

First there are Zechariah and Elizabeth, advanced in years but childless. Zechariah's priestly duties take him into the heart of the temple where he meets the angel Gabriel over an offering of incense. God's messenger brings strange greetings: Prayers have been answered. A baby is on the way. His name will be John—this miracle baby—and he will be a holy prophet, preparing the way for the Lord.

Luke remembers all the little details: how Zechariah questions the message and the messenger, how he lost his voice for the entire pregnancy, how his first words were that strange name—*“we shall call him John.”*

Don't forget! How six-months later, this same Gabriel visits Mary. Can you remember what he said?

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end”
 (Luke 1:30-33).

Can you believe Mary's courage? How she said "Yes" to God's plan! Remember how Gabriel told her that Elizabeth was pregnant too!

And so, we arrive at this moment: Mary's hasty journey from Nazareth to an unnamed town near Jerusalem seeking out the company of her kinswoman Elizabeth.

Where do you go and who do you tell: when something is so wonderful that your heart is bursting; when something causes you unbearable sorrow; when you are swept up in the grips of dangerous opportunity?

Mary arrives bursting with news and eager to see the miracle for herself. I imagine her and Elizabeth, belly-button to belly-button, embracing past Elizabeth's growing waistline, and laughing! There is joy and rejoicing—the confirmation that God is moving in and through the lives of these two women, in and through the children they carried.

Pregnancy is such a tender subject—in a season when there is so much talk of newborn babies, I think of those struggling with infertility or unplanned pregnancy or those whose circumstances make child bearing a risky proposition. Then Luke bids me to remember that in Elizabeth and Mary, such women find a portrait of fierce sympathy.

Elizabeth speaks with prophetic voice—interpreting the sign of her unborn son “leaping” in her womb. She affirms Mary—even before Mary shares her “news.”

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

I think of the way that this Spirit-filled cry has become a prayer, prayed by millions of the faithful every day: *“Hail Mary, full of grace; the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.”*

And in no less prophetic voice, we hear Mary reply, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior for he has look with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”

Our Christmas Carols brand Mary as “meek” and “gentle” and “mild” but I imagine her standing with a fist in the air as she proclaims her Magnificat—extolling God's power to redeem. She uses the past-tense for God's feats of justice, recognizing that God's redemptive work has already begun and is coming into this and every present moment. She sings the power of God: to lift up the lowly, while bringing down the powerful; to fill the hungry, while sending the rich away empty; to scatter the thoughts of the proud, while remembering the promise of a savior.

Mary's voice is fierce—echoing with the strength and audacity of other fierce Biblical women: Deborah and Jael, Judith and Hannah, Tamar and Ruth and Naomi. She speaks the righteous outrage of an oppressed people from the midst of a marginal life.

This is Luke's retelling, which makes clear God's preferential option for the poor and powerless. Here, in Elizabeth and Mary's prophetic speech, we hear preference in the message and see preference in the messengers.

To be a woman in Judah was to live a marginal life—dependent on the men to whom they belonged: fathers, husbands, sons or struggling in the life of the unattached woman, the widow or divorcee. We can hear the limits of their lives from a book of Jewish Wisdom. Writing in the second-century BCE. Ben Sira, author of Sirach makes this observation:

“A daughter is a secret anxiety to her father, and worry over her robs him of sleep; when she is young, for fear she may not marry, or if married, for fear she may be disliked; while a virgin, for fear she may be seduced and become pregnant in her father's house; or having a husband, for fear she may go astray, or, though married, for fear she may be barren” (Sirach 42:9-10).

Mary is the virgin who has become pregnant in her father's house. She is greeted by Elizabeth, the woman though married has been barren.

The law was clear—Hebrew men were obligated by God's command to have children. The Mishnah tells us that after 10 years if a wife failed to give a man a child, he might freely divorce her and pursue his responsibility with another wife. (Mishnah Yevamot 6:6)²

The law was also clear—an engaged virgin found to have been intimate with a man (whether forced or consensual) was subject to death by stoning.

Elizabeth and Mary lived dangerous, marginal lives.

Yet, here we come to the hidden part of the story; the part that no one talks about at family parties. It comes to us when we emulate Paul Harvey, sharing “the rest of the story...”

In our snap-shot, the men are noticeably absent; yet, if we pay attention, we may see their action in our picture. Luke doesn't elaborate, but we know that Zechariah remained married to Elizabeth without regard for the law, without regard for his religious obligations, without regard for the privilege granted him to seek a divorce. Luke remains equally silent on Joseph, who gives Mary the shelter of acceptance without regard for the law, without regard for the social stigma, without regard for the privilege granted him to annul the engagement.

Zechariah and Joseph preserve Elizabeth and Mary's life. Zechariah and Joseph guard the dignity of these women, and preserve them from scorn and ridicule and judgement. With compassion and faithfulness, Zechariah and Joseph demonstrate love for Elizabeth and Mary.

What a picture that makes!

Week to week, we pray for the in-breaking of God's reign. And here are Elizabeth and Mary and Zechariah and Joseph, living it out-loud. The in-breaking reign of God dislocates human conventions, upends human power, and reveals divine justice and mercy.

This is a love story—a family love story.

This is God's justice, God's equity, God's righteousness, God's peace—God's *love* in action. This is God—choosing to be among the least and the last and the lost, to be born of a human mother, to occupy a Bethlehem manger, to flee an egomaniacal ruler, to proclaim God's justice at the cost of death on a cross.

Mary tells us we see this power at work: wherever the high are displaced and the lowly raised—and equity is given birth; wherever vainglory is scattered and community gathered—and each life received as a gift from God; wherever deprivation and hoarding are vanquished—and generosity and sharing abound; wherever the cruciform shape of God's mercy is found among God's people—and love prevails.

Mary and Elizabeth, Zechariah and Joseph remind us whose we are, and by God's mercy and grace who we shall become.

In this holy season—may we share this family story.

May we see in our neighbors: brothers and sisters, wives and daughters, husbands and sons, and may we serve God's justice and equity as we embrace them with compassion and love.

Amen.

¹ Duke, Paul Simpson. "Commentary 2 on Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)." *Connections*. Year C, Vol 1. Eds Joel B. Green, et.al. Louisville: WJK, 2018. 61.

² Mishnah Yevamot 6:6. *One may not abstain from procreation unless he [already] has children. Beit Shammai say: [One must have] two boys, and Beit Hillel say: [One must have] a boy and a girl, as it says, "Male and female He created them" (Bereishit 5:2). [If] one married a woman and waited for ten years and she did not bear children, he is not permitted to abstain [from his obligation]. [If] he divorced her she is permitted to marry somebody else, and the second [husband] is permitted to wait ten years with her. And if she miscarries he counts [ten years] from the point she miscarried. A man is commanded to procreate but a woman is not. Rabbi Yochanan ben Beroka says: It states to both of them, "And God blessed them and He said to them... be fruitful and multiply" (Bereishit 1:25).*