

Sermon for 12-23-18
Gospel -- Luke 1:39-55
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Today's Gospel reading -- with the joyful encounter between Mary and Elizabeth, and Mary's glorious song of praise -- is one of my favorite passages in all of Scripture. Both Elizabeth and Mary, both of them, are sanctified, anointed, overflowing with holiness and trust and confidence.

The joy is palpable when Elizabeth sees her young cousin approaching and exclaims, 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?"ⁱ

And the thanksgiving in Mary's words! So young, so humble and yet so strong, she who has said 'yes,' who has accepted the honor of being entrusted with the very life of God: "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."ⁱⁱ

The language is beautiful, the glory is profound. But there are many other beautiful, profound episodes in Scripture, aren't there? Why is this one so special? Why do we love it so much?

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Methodist pastor Adam Hamilton wrote a book called *The Journey* all about the events leading Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem on the night of Christ's birth. He weaves historical details with personal anecdotes from his own extensive travels in the Holy Land.

He describes his experience at the Church of the Visitation in Ein Karem, where Zechariah and Elizabeth are thought to have lived. "Outside [the church], a bronze sculpture shows Mary and Elizabeth greeting one another...

As I stood watching busloads of visitors, I was struck by the number of women who came to this holy site. I watched as African women embraced each other and as European and Latina women came holding hands or laughing together... I was caught in the role of photographer as women began... handing me their cameras, asking if I would take their pictures next to Mary and Elizabeth. There was such a sense of joy [in that place]..."ⁱⁱⁱ

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Joy. The joy that Adam Hamilton witnessed in these many pilgrims is a reflection of the joy expressed in Elizabeth's and Mary's words in their meeting so long ago. It's a joy borne out of dynamic, living faith -- faith in a God who does marvelous things in mysterious ways, a God who breaks down barriers and illuminates darkness, a God who can and will use any willing servant (no matter how lowly or unremarkable) to bring a little bit of heaven to earth. This God does not choose monarchs and heads of state to act through; those who are revered here on earth are not the ones this God anoints to do marvelous things. This God chooses, not a king or a prince, but a pitied old woman and a simple peasant girl to bring salvation to the world once and for all time!

Mary and Elizabeth are God's vessels, bearers of the Holy Spirit: literally, yes, because they carry anointed children in their wombs, but they are so much more than their biology. They are vessels of the Holy Spirit because they are both brimming, overflowing with faith in God's goodness. Their entire being, mind, body, and soul, is open and oriented toward the quiet rustlings of the Spirit. To encounter Mary and Elizabeth is to encounter a reflection of God's grace. Their souls magnify the Lord, and their spirits rejoice in God.

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And Mary and Elizabeth show us another precious truth, one that you and I are prone to forget: we need each other. Think of what happens immediately before this encounter -- the angel Gabriel visits Mary at her home in Nazareth, and delivers perhaps the biggest "Surprise!" the world has ever known. And what does Mary do after Gabriel departs from her? Luke tells us

that she "set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country," where Elizabeth and Zechariah lived.^{iv}

Think about this -- Mary receives this life-changing, earth-shattering news, and where does she run? Not to her parents, not to her fiance, not to her girlfriends (she must have had some, she's a teenage girl, after all), and not to her local rabbi... she runs straight to Elizabeth. We don't get to hear Mary's inner monologue, of course, but we can imagine. Maybe she's just a teeny bit nervous, or confused, or even shell-shocked from what she's just learned? Maybe she is, in today's elegant turn of phrase, 'freaking out' because her life is about to change in ways she can hardly imagine and she doesn't know what to do or what it all means?

Mary runs straight to Elizabeth, who is older and wiser and more experienced, who is a woman of deep and abiding faith. In her moment of confusion, Mary turns to Elizabeth to find clarity and solace and affirmation. Mary knows the stories of God choosing and using regular, normal, everyday people to do great things; but knowing those stories and believing that **you** could be one of those servants are two different things.

It's only after Elizabeth's joyous proclamation, her words of affirmation and embrace, that Mary is able to sing. After Elizabeth calls out to Mary, and takes her in her arms, and showers her with love and praise, **then** Mary can sing out, **then** Mary's soul "magnifies the Lord" and her spirit "rejoices in God."^v

In this moment, Mary and Elizabeth need each other. They need each other as sisters in faith, as devoted followers of God who seek to serve as best they can in each new day. Mary and Elizabeth build each other up in holiness and love and light -- and we can do that, too. We can do that for each other. We can turn toward each other and proclaim the goodness, the holiness we see. We can affirm the presence and movement of God in each other. We can help each other realize that we are all God's holy instruments in this world, and we can all magnify the Lord.

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What if we had faith like Mary and Elizabeth? What if our souls magnified the Lord; what if each one of us could reflect God's love and grace into the world around us? We need not grow an angel-announced child in our bodies; that is glorious, yes, but it's not the source of Mary and Elizabeth's holiness. These women have real, beautiful, dynamic faith that permeates every aspect of their lives. Together, Mary and Elizabeth know themselves to be daughters of the Most High God, and they allow themselves to believe that they are worthy of God's blessing. Mary and Elizabeth have trust and confidence -- in God, and in themselves. They believe that God can speak to them and through them, that God can use them to bring holiness to life. They love God so much that they are willing to risk their reputations and their respectability for a chance to do God's will.

We can do that, too. We can be like Mary and Elizabeth; we can allow our souls to magnify the Lord. We can turn our lives over to God, we can soften our hearts and let down our walls, we can build each other up, we can let go of our illusions of control and have faith in God's promises, mystery and all.

As Elizabeth says: "Blessed is she [**or he**] who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken... by the Lord."^{vi}

That is why we love this story. Because Mary and Elizabeth allow us to see how we too can be blessed, we too can believe, we too can be vessels of the Holy Spirit and do amazing things for God, together. We too can magnify the Lord! **Amen.**

ⁱ Luke 1:42-43

ⁱⁱ 1:46-49

ⁱⁱⁱ pages 78-79 in Hamilton's *The Journey* (Abingdon, 2016)

^{iv} Luke 1:39

^v 1:46-47

^{vi} 1:45