

“Stories that Welcome Us”

Luke 1:39-56

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February 2nd, 2020

“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 leapt 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 leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’

And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour 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 for ever.’
And Mary remained with her for about three months and then
returned to her home.”
This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Earlier in Luke chapter 1, we learn that both Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah “were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.” (Luke 1:6-7) In a society where a woman’s primary purpose was to bear children, preferably boys, her life had likely been one of ostracization and societal shame. But then everything changed when God intervened and Elizabeth became pregnant in her old age with John, who would prepare the way for the Messiah.

Elizabeth had a story of shame and isolation that had been forced upon her by a patriarchal society. But that story was transformed by God into a story of unplanned hope and joy. At month five in her pregnancy, Elizabeth tells her own story this way: “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

And now, Elizabeth’s young cousin, Mary, barely a teenager, shows up on Elizabeth’s doorstep with a story of her own - a story of an unplanned pregnancy that could have led her to be lawfully stoned to death by her village. Mary had said ‘yes’ to God’s plan to carry God’s own life in her womb and then went “with haste” to

her cousin Elizabeth's house. We can't know for sure what Mary was thinking as she set out to Elizabeth's in such a hurry, but we do know that after the angel called Mary, the angel said, "And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Maybe after the awe of being called by God had started to wear off, Mary needed a real friend. She had no way of knowing what Elizabeth would say when she got to her house, but after hearing that Elizabeth's own story had been flipped upside-down by God, perhaps Mary thought Elizabeth's house would be a safe place for her own wild story to find a home.

Elizabeth had a choice with Mary standing on her doorstep. She could have gone with the flow of her culture and been polite to Mary, but kept a distance so as not to be associated with the shame of a pre-marital pregnancy. But Elizabeth took another path, blessing Mary as the Spirit made John leap inside her womb: "...blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." I have to wonder if it was Elizabeth's wide open door of welcome that allowed Mary to be filled with God's Spirit, making Mary bold enough to sing about bringing tyrants down from their thrones and lifting up the lowly.

God does something in us and in our relationships when we open up and share our stories with one another like Elizabeth and Mary. And we all have stories. A story of the way we were bullied growing up and how it makes us extra careful in our relationships. A story of a loss that happened years ago that is right there with us every day as we try to get out of bed. A story of someone

showing up for us when we were younger in a way that changed the trajectory of our path in life. And what I love about our God is that God doesn't leave us alone in our stories, but gives us to each other. The angel told Mary that Elizabeth had also had an impossible thing happen to her, almost like God wanted to help these two women belong to each other as they figured out how to live in these stories God was writing. Mary was brave, showing up unannounced at Elizabeth's door in complete vulnerability. And Elizabeth was generous with her story, letting it open her up so that Mary could find a safe space to be welcomed and blessed. Both women let their stories carry them to one another. And the result was an outpouring of blessing, a radical song of hope, and a relationship transformed by the Holy Spirit.

There's a woman named Alison who has given me permission to share a bit of her story this morning. Alison lives in rural Oklahoma, and in April of 2019, she gave birth to a beautiful, healthy baby girl. But during her pregnancy, she had been incredibly sick, which had sent her into a deep depression. Alison was brave enough to reach out to an older friend she could trust, and this woman helped her get some desperately needed treatment to address her severe depression. With the right medication, Alison's mood stabilized, possibly saving her life.

After giving birth, Alison had the opportunity to meet for coffee with another young mom who was also struggling with depression. Alison decided to take a risk and share her own story of how seeking treatment and medication had helped her. As Alison and this young mom finished their meeting, another young woman holding a tiny baby stopped Alison. "I'm sorry to bother you," she said. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop. But I heard you

mention postpartum depression. Can I talk to you?" Alison sat back down in the coffee shop and for over an hour listened as this woman poured out her own story of postpartum depression, of the frightening intrusive thoughts she was experiencing, of checking herself into a hospital psych ward to make sure she would be safe. To make a long story short, these many conversations have led Alison and some other women in her small town to start organizing a support group especially for women who are navigating being a mom with a perinatal mood disorder.

And it all started because Alison had a story that she was generously willing to share. It all started because a young mom in a coffee shop had the courage to pull Alison aside and say, "Can I talk to you?" And I have to believe that the Holy Spirit was there the way She was for Elizabeth and Mary - leaping with excitement, creating connection, and bringing forth healing and new life.

So my question to you this morning is this: What is the story in your own life that is waiting to be shared? Pastor Dexter will be teaching a class right after worship today and for the next few weeks about how to tell your unique story of faith. Perhaps a class like that sounds challenging or even frightening, but what new life might be waiting for you on the other side of that new challenge? As you practice telling your own story, I wonder - who will you find on *your* doorstep who needs a safe place for their story to belong? Our stories are gifts God has given us, and they start bearing fruit in our lives when we share them with one another. It's risky. It's a leap of faith. But perhaps it will lead to radical blessing and unbridled joy we never could have imagined. Amen.