

Micah 5:2-5a

Psalm 80:1-7

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

Have you ever had a best friend? You know, somebody who just makes all the hard times easier and all the fun times much more fun? Somebody who can make you laugh when you're feeling low? It's an amazing thing...this synergy between two people. It's almost magical. Our connection to someone else can divide our grief and double our joy! And it can make us brave enough to take on the toughest tasks. And when it doesn't go well, it can also cause us a lot of emotional pain.

This morning, we meet two women who have this kind of connection...this kind of personal chemistry: Elizabeth and Mary. They are relatives...although the Bible doesn't tell us how they are related. Elizabeth is much older than Mary...not of the same generation. She is married to a priest, Zechariah. Her role in the community as the wife of a priest gives her a certain amount of status, but she is living on the margins of her world because she has failed at the one task given to females: having babies. She is barren. In her world, that puts her at the bottom of the barrel. She's a failure. That's her only job as a woman...to conceive and bear children. And she has been unable to do that all her life. People whisper about her behind her back and they feel sorry for her. Most of them believe she must have offended God in some way and God decided not to let her have any children. She's lived all her adult life with that kind of social pain. But boy did God have a surprise for her...and for everyone in her community!!

Elizabeth is six months pregnant with John, who will be known as The Baptist, when Mary hears the news. The same angel...Gabriel...who told Mary about her own pregnancy also tells her that Elizabeth is now pregnant. "That can't be" says Mary at the same moment that she is protesting to Gabriel that she herself can't be expecting a baby because she has no husband. Gabriel simply reminds her that with God, all things are possible.

We can understand why Mary is bursting with excitement...not only about her own news, but also the news about Elizabeth. She can't get there fast enough, but it is a 90 mile walk, so her journey takes a while. She has some time to think as she walks. Perhaps she thinks about God having chosen the shamed Elizabeth to bear a son in her old age. Perhaps she's thinking about her own situation. Why would God have chosen her? She is a faithful teenager. She goes to synagogue on the Sabbath, she says the prayers, she observes the holidays and holy days, but she isn't regal. She's nobody special...at least not in her own eyes. And she is risking shame and

ostracism by her own family, her circle of friends, and her community by becoming pregnant when she is not married. She is even risking death. The penalty for a young woman who becomes pregnant out of wedlock...in the world Mary lives in...is to be stoned to death! Hers is a world in which virginity and female purity is of prime importance. They can't afford to have any 'tainted' women among them. All of these things must have been running through Mary's thoughts.

And yet she is excited about Elizabeth's news and can't wait to share her own. There's a special bond between two women who are having babies at the same time. Sharing the experience magnifies the joy and wonder and tends to reduce the anxiety. And these two women have the added bond of sharing pregnancies that are both unexpected and out of the ordinary. And they are both marginalized women in their own communities.

Can you imagine the depth of the joy of these two women when they first see one another? Hugs and kisses and joyful tears and giggling...maybe even a little jumping up and down. Elizabeth hardly has time to react because her own baby is moving around inside of her with great gusto! Before Mary has a chance to say anything, Elizabeth virtually shouts out to her, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" How does Elizabeth know? And why did Elizabeth refer to Mary as 'the mother of my Lord'? Elizabeth is providing prophetic testimony.

And then, meek and mild little Mary, breaks into her song of glorification to God that we call the Magnificat. It is probably one of the most famous songs in scripture. She seems to have forgotten all about her precarious social circumstances. She seems to have been emboldened by the fact that Elizabeth knew Mary's news before she had a chance to share it. This soft-spoken, well-mannered teenager begins her praise of God. She finds her voice. But listen to her words and decide for yourself whether or not Mary is the meek and mild creature we have always believed her to be.

"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."

Mary doesn't seem to be at all distracted by the precariousness of her situation. She's not reacting quite the way we would expect a teenager, pregnant out of wedlock, would react. She's not worried about what people will think or what they will say. She believes down to her bones all the things that Gabriel has told her. She's not scared. She's ecstatic. And Elizabeth has just confirmed to her that she is right to believe. She is not a passive tool being used by God. On

the strength of her belief, she has an active role to play in the redemption of the world. In her magnification of God, Mary is saying a profound “yes” to being an instrumental part of God’s plan for the world. And then she becomes prophetic. Her words are revolutionary. And she speaks in the past tense...as though all these things that she sees as revelations about the nature of God have already happened. Just listen.

“His mercy is for those who fear him; 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 promises he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Mary sings for the poor, for the outcast, for every person who is hurting and suffering. These people reside within her just as surely as the Son of God resides within her. This song of hers is a song of defiance of the status quo. This song of hers is worthy of being in the company of the protest songs of our own history and the African-American Spirituals that sustained generations caught in slavery. Protesting the status quo is countercultural. That Mary should say “yes” to God and embrace her pregnancy is itself counter-cultural. But her prophetic words in the Magnificat re-affirms the divine “No.” God says “No” to injustice; God says “No” to poverty God says “No” to political power that oppresses people.

This Jesus, who is on the way to join us, will spend his ministry promoting the countercultural. His ministry will be one of divine reversals. In weakness he will find his strength. He will return hate with love. He will embrace the marginal of his day and restore them to well-being and the center of community life. He will not condemn, but forgive.

When we join in this countercultural mindset...this reversal of the status quo, we align ourselves with God. We are then called upon to be transparent...to be real and authentic. When we extend our kindness to someone who doesn’t deserve it, when we can bring a smile to the heart of someone who is burdened, when we give without hesitation or reservation, we magnify God. Each one of us in the course of our daily lives has the opportunity to magnify God.

At this time of year, there are so many people who are struggling with broken promises, missed opportunities, unrealistic expectations and disappointments. And so many people complain about the hollowness of secular Christmas preparations. They find no peace or joy in the non-stop 24/7 chirpy little Christmas songs on the radio and they don’t care how many ornaments are put on the Christmas tree. We are called upon to relieve some of those burdens by being observant and caring and gently meeting the need of the one who hurts.

Mary's prophetic witness is that God says "No" to all the injustice in the world. Actually, the word "No" is a sharp word. It is a laser point. But the magnifier can catch the sunlight in such a way that the focused sunlight can start a fire. That's the power of prophetic witness. That's the power of magnifying God...and it happens every time we are brave enough and moved enough to say "No" to injustice.

Mary magnified the Lord with her profound "Yes" to the dangerous, countercultural mission for which she was chosen. She heard God and believed. We, too, can align ourselves with God. It's easy to get caught up in the demands of everyday life in such a way that we lose track of what's really important to us. Without realizing it, sometimes it's not God that we magnify but the things of this world that grab our attention. It takes intention, prayer, study, conversation and sometimes a good partner in crime...somebody with whom we have some chemistry...somebody who generates that synergy between people to magnify God rather than the things in this world.

Will Jesus arrive on December 25? Yes, he will. And each year we bid the savior to come to us... because we still need a savior.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.