

Micah 5:2-5a

Psalm 80:1-7

Hebrews 10:5-10

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

Most of us have some idea of what shame feels like. The first time we have that feeling is probably in childhood when we've done something that the adults around us know that we know we shouldn't do. It doesn't matter too much what it is. We just know that the words, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" pierce like a dagger. Very often these words come from a parent who loves us and wants us to be the best we can be. However, in correcting us for some bad behavior, they very often heap the hot coals of shame on us. It's a feeling that none of us will ever forget and it's one that wounds all the way to the core of our being. It's not just a chastisement, it assaults our very sense of self. Wanting to avoid ever feeling that awful again, we tend to steer clear of whatever behavior brought it on in the first place. And that's the whole point. The adult doing the shaming is the one who wants to be sure that we never repeat the disgraceful behavior. What they may not realize is that 'shaming' assaults the core of a person

But sometimes the shame we feel has little if anything to do with events that we can control. We have before us this morning two women who are steeped in shame by everyone around them. In their world, the community of family and friends in which they live is the whole world. It's all that they know. They live and work and have their being submersed in this community of close family, extended family and friends who are often very much like family. The living constructs of first century Israel are multiple closeknit communities scattered throughout the countryside. For almost everyone, that closeknit community is their entire world. But here are two women...Elizabeth and Mary...who are struggling with overwhelming joy and are also mired in deep shame.

Elizabeth and Mary are relatives. Our scripture doesn't tell us exactly the nature of their relationship, but they are family to each other. Many of us have such relationships in our own families. Elizabeth is quite a bit older than Mary and is the wife of Zechariah who is a priest at the synagogue. Elizabeth has no children. She has been barren all her life. It is a great sadness and heartbreak for her and she lives with constant shame about her inability to bear children. Conceiving and delivering children into the world is the primary duty and responsibility of a married woman. Not only is Elizabeth heartbroken about not having any children of her own, she also deals daily with the public shame of being a barren woman. The belief in her world is

that God has not found her worthy of motherhood...or that God is punishing her for some horrendous misdeed that her community can only speculate about. Elizabeth knows people talk about her behind her back. It's painful. She knows they look down on her as unworthy in God's eyes and probably unworthy of being married to a Jewish holy man. She has lived with this shame all her married life and has carried her broken heart as tenderly as she would a child she nurtures. The shaming she endures is cruel and undeserved, but it is the world in which she lives.

Mary has quite a different story, but she too is filled with shame and is fearful for her safety in the community she calls home. She is much younger than Elizabeth and has not yet begun her adult life and adult duties. She is betrothed to a young man named Joseph who is admired and respected by all who know him. Both their families are looking forward to the consummation of this relationship in marriage. But before that takes place, Mary learns that she is pregnant and is going to have a baby that she is to name Jesus. A young, unmarried woman who turns up pregnant without the benefit of marriage is banned from her community. She could be stoned to death as a punishment for her misdeed. The shame is intolerable and her very life hangs in the balance. She has disgraced not only herself, but her entire family. It doesn't look good for her and the situation puts Joseph in a very uncomfortable position as well. He's obligated by the community to turn his back on Mary given her present condition. The social pressure is enormous. But he loves her dearly and does not want to abandon her. What should he do?

But in today's scripture reading, here are these two women rejoicing with one another about the prospect of becoming mothers...one who has been living with the shame of bareness all her life and the other who is just beginning to understand the magnitude of the shame that is being heaped upon her by all those in her world. Both women are aware of the painful nature of shame. Elizabeth, by virtue of her pregnancy, has been released from the shame of barrenness. Mary, on the other hand, is just beginning to discover the enormous impact that shame will have on her life as a result of her pregnancy. Both women rejoice with each other in the prospect of being involved in having a new life come into the world...no matter what the circumstances.

So what are we learning about God's attitude toward shame in the stories of these two women? We learn that God pays little to no attention to social convention which is a construct created by fallible human beings. It would seem that God couldn't care less that Elizabeth had not been able to have children. God certainly took care of that and paralyzed all the painful tongues that had heaped pain and misery on Elizabeth all her life. Apparently, God wasn't punishing Elizabeth at all and she had never lost favor in God's eyes as all the people surrounding her believed. God had dispelled that misconception with Elizabeth's pregnancy and she was now free to rejoice with her husband and with Mary and with all those who had stood beside her when others were looking down on her.

But what about Mary? Her situation is completely different. The shame and fear that enveloped her must have been very painful...and nothing is said about that in scripture. It would appear that she had violated the mores and customs of her world by conceiving a child out of wedlock. The condemnation of her world was swift and fierce. We still have quite a lot of that going on today. So what do we learn about the nature of God and how God deals with our shame and condemnation of another? As we watch Elizabeth and Mary celebrate together their joy in becoming mothers, we see the outside world filled with shame and condemnation disappearing into the background. God was not shaming Elizabeth by making her barren. When the time was right, God *chose* Elizabeth to be mother to a very special prophet.

And as we know from our vantage point, God guided and protected both Mary and Joseph in bringing Jesus into the world. God *chose* Mary to bear God's son. Being chosen for such a grace-filled, center-stage position in God's plan for the salvation of the world is an honor beyond description. God was certainly *not* heaping shame on Mary. If anything, God was protecting her from it.

God's dealings with these two women show us that God does not shame and God does not evaluate human beings the same way other human beings do. God does chastise. God does require that we behave ourselves and that we avoid actions that would prompt someone else to say, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" Even when we are wrong...even when we are sinful...even when we disappoint God....even when we anger God...we may say to ourselves "I ought to be ashamed of myself," but God will never do that. God doesn't heap shame on us. God doesn't punish us with cruelty. God chastises and God re-directs...and perhaps God stirs within us our own pronouncement to ourselves of, "I ought to be ashamed of myself." But shame and humiliation are not in God's toolbox of dealing with the children God loves. Shaming someone doesn't just chastise them. Shaming someone mortally wounds their very soul and assaults their identity. Shaming is saying, "You're a bad person." Chastising is saying, "You did a bad thing." God corrects us and chastises us. God does not assault us.

As Mary sings her praises of God in the Magnificat, she speaks of all that God will do to bring justice to the world. He will elevate the lowly and bring down the mighty. He will raise up those who are oppressed and he will pull down the oppressors on top. God's aim is not in shaming us for doing wrong. God's aim is in providing justice and fair play for all those with whom we live and move and have our being. God wants us to play fair...and when we don't...God doesn't shame us...God simply rearranges things so that justice will prevail.

Such is Mary's hope for the world the child she is carrying will usher in. Such is the hope of all of us as we approach this Christmas celebration. God cares not only about our immortal souls, God also cares about injustice and oppression in *this* life. Jesus' life on earth which began two thousand years ago, begins again in our lifetime with the same hope, the same message, the

same reversal of fortunes that we witnessed in Jesus' ministry. That's the ministry that Jesus wants us to carry on. When Jesus says, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel" he is telling us to spread the word about Jesus' mission and work to overturn injustice wherever we encounter it.

With God's help we can do just that.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.