

“Mary’s Visit to Elizabeth”

Date: December 14, 2014 Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Luke 1:39-45 Occasion: Advent 2, series “the Journey”

Theme: Elizabeth, mentors, the Magnificat

Adapted from Adam Hamilton’s book, *The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehm,* Nashville: Abingdon Press, “Mary’s Visit to Elizabeth,” pp. 61-78.

Last week we considered Joseph, the fiancé of Mary and the father of our Lord, Jesus Christ. His story was told in the book of Matthew. This week we return to the Gospel of Luke and reconnect with Mary.

After Mary received word that she was going to give birth to a child, the long-awaited Messiah, she was probably confused and terrified. To whom could she turn to share what she had heard. With whom could she share her feelings?

Perhaps she remembers that before the angel Gabriel left, he had mentioned that Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth was expecting a child. Wow! That in itself was a miracle, since Elizabeth was considered beyond child-bearing years.

Mary must not only have *known* Elizabeth, but also felt a genuine closeness to her. Elizabeth may have been an older cousin, or even an aunt. Whatever their relationship, it seems clear that Mary and Elizabeth had a significant relationship prior to the Annunciation.

I say that, because, as soon as Mary learned that she is pregnant she “went with haste” to visit Elizabeth. It is likely that before Mary told her own parents about her pregnancy, she went to find Elizabeth, in the hope that Elizabeth would both believe her and help her. Mary knew that if there was one person who would understand, it would be Elizabeth.

Tradition places the home of Elizabeth, and her husband Zechariah, in Ein Karem, a village on a hill just a few miles from the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. It would have been less than an hour's walk to the Temple, significant to know because Zechariah was one of the priests in the Temple.

But, Ein Karem was *80 miles* from Mary's home in Nazareth. The journey by foot would have taken perhaps nine days. Mary would not have traveled alone, but would have made the journey with other people who were on their way to Jerusalem.

It is likely that Mary explained to her parents that she had heard of Elizabeth's pregnancy and wanted to go there to help her during her pregnancy. How else would she explain to her parents why she wanted to travel so far from home?

The fact that Mary was willing to travel nine days across three mountain ranges to see Elizabeth speaks volumes about how she was feeling. She longed for someone who might believe her, and who could help her make sense of what was happening.

Mary was seeking out an older woman, a maternal figure who was *not* her mother. Elizabeth seemed to be the perfect person for Mary to visit. She was married to an older priest named Zechariah, and together they were the New Testament's Abraham and Sarah.

This older couple had tried for years, hoping to have children. They had resigned themselves to the fact that children were not going to be a part of their lives. Many couples, who have been unable to have children of their own, treat their nieces and nephews as if they are their own kids. Perhaps *this* is why Mary felt drawn to Elizabeth; maybe Elizabeth had been like a mother to Mary in days past.

After nine days of difficult travel, Mary finally reached Elizabeth's home and announced herself: "Elizabeth, it's me, Mary!" Luke tells us that when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped 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." (Luke 1:41-42) These words are quite familiar to Roman Catholics who recognize them as part of the "Hail Mary."

Elizabeth goes on, "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 leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." (1:43-45)

Imagine Mary's feelings as she heard these words. It had been at least ten days since Gabriel had appeared to Mary with his confusing announcement. She had spent the last nine days traveling with her secret. She felt uncertain, afraid, and wondered how any of this could be true.

But then, before she could even tell her relative what had happened, Elizabeth showed that she knew Mary's secret, and Elizabeth was filled with joy on Mary's behalf. Elizabeth went on to say, in essence:

"Listen child. You don't have to be afraid. You've been blessed. Blessed! Don't you see it? *You've* been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah. Such good things will come of this. You are so blessed! And the child within your womb is blessed as well!!"

At last, with these prophetic words of Elizabeth, Mary's fear gave way to joy. She opened her mouth and began to praise God. Up to this point we have not heard *joy* from Mary, only submission to God's will. But now she felt joy that she was going to have a child, and more than that, her child would be the Messiah.

She broke out into song, "My soul magnifies the Lord! My spirit rejoices in God my Savior!" (Luke 1:46-47)

Mary needed someone who could help her gain perspective on what she was facing, someone who would listen to and believe in her; someone who would encourage her. She found all that and more in her kinswoman Elizabeth.

All of us need an Elizabeth in our lives, an older person who understands, who can guide and encourage and affirm us. Similarly, we all need to be an Elizabeth for a younger person. You see, part of God's purpose for our lives is that we seek to mentor and encourage younger people.

So let me ask you, who is your Elizabeth, the older person who serves as a mentor for you? And, who is your Mary, that younger person you're encouraging and investing in?

Over the course of my ministry, in every church that I have served, I have sought out a spiritual mentor. A spiritual director, a spiritual friend, call it what you like, I need someone that I can turn to, on a regular basis for a reality check, for guidance, for assurance, for affirmation.

Once a month, here in Erie, I see a spiritual director who is a Roman Catholic priest; his name is Father Jerry. I can be honest with Father Jerry. We talk about personal issues, family issues, faith

issues, ministry issues. Father Jerry is my current mentor, but I've had several over the course of my ministry. These mentors comfort me in times of crisis, challenge me when I'm off target, affirm me when I make progress, and love me for who I am.

Who does that for you? Now, to be honest, I don't think your marriage partner can be that person, because sometimes you need to talk about what's going on in the marriage. But we all need an Elizabeth in our life. Who is your Elizabeth?

At Lakewood, we're seeking to incorporate this idea of mentoring into the Confirmation Class, pairing an adult with each one of the confirmands. The adults don't have to be experts in theology, but they do need to be willing to be a friend to a younger person on the journey.

I think we could use this concept of mentoring with each of our committees, with the outgoing chairperson serving as an Elizabeth to the incoming chairperson. We could do the same in Sunday School classes, new member classes, UMM, UMW, and even the choir.

Truth is, we **all** need an Elizabeth, *and* we are all called to encourage a Mary. Imagine how differently the story might have been, if Mary had no one with whom to share her fears, her confusion. How might the story have changed?

At Christmas time, thoughts turn to gifts, presents that you open up on Christmas morning, tearing off the paper. But gifts can also be the kind that doesn't come with pretty bows. Many people need the gift of your time more than they need more stuff.

So, who is your Elizabeth? Who is your Mary? Let us help each other to find joy, just as Mary did long ago. Amen? Amen.