

## *The Journey to Bethlehem sermon series*

### *“Mary and Elizabeth”*

[Luke 1:39-56](#)

We are in the middle of our sermon series, The Journey to Bethlehem. Based on Adam Hamilton’s book, *The Journey*, we are reading the familiar Gospel stories surrounding the birth of Jesus and seeking to gain insight into our own Advent journey. On the first Sunday, we reflected on the story of Mary and her willingness to say yes to God’s invitation. Last Sunday, with Bishop Minerva Carcaño as our guest preacher, we reflected on the story of Joseph in the Gospel of Matthew and learned about God’s higher righteousness which Joseph accepted. Today, we come back to Mary in the Gospel of Luke as she visits her relative, Elizabeth.

There is no record of how Mary was feeling after the angel Gabriel had departed, leaving her with the news that she would give birth to a son, who would be the long-awaited Messiah. But at the very least, Mary must have been very confused and terrified. How could she not be? How was she supposed to break the news of her pregnancy to her family and friends, especially to her fiancé, Joseph? As a faithful teenager, Mary would have been well aware that she could be put to public shame and even death because of her out of wedlock pregnancy. That is what the law and tradition of her time would have called for. So, what did this young woman decide to do? Run away, of course! As today’s scripture tells us, “she went out with *haste* to visit her relative, Elizabeth in a Judean town.”

Elizabeth was an older relative who was married to Zechariah, a priest. After many years of trying unsuccessfully to have a baby, the couple had reached old age, well past having hope of conceiving biological children of their own. Then, one day, out of the blue, the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah while he was on duty at the Temple, in the most sacred part of the sanctuary called the Holy of Holies. Gabriel told him that his wife would have a son.

The angel’s prophecy turned out to be true as Elizabeth soon became pregnant. Perhaps, this was the excuse Mary needed. She could tell her parents that she wanted to go help her dear older relative Elizabeth in the 6th month of what would have been a very abnormal pregnancy. Actually, we are told that Mary stays with Elizabeth for 3 months, implying that she stayed until Elizabeth’s baby was born.

Christian tradition claims Ein Karem, a village on a hill, a few miles away from Jerusalem, as the home of Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah and the birthplace of their son, John the Baptist. Today, there are many churches and monasteries in the small town of about 2000 people, and it attracts 3 million visitors a year from around the world.

Ein Karem is 80 miles away from Nazareth, Mary’s hometown. This means that Mary’s trip to Elizabeth’s home probably took about 9 days by foot. It is highly likely that she was not traveling alone but with a caravan of many other adults who were making the trip to Jerusalem. Regardless, it would still have been quite the trip for a recently pregnant 13-year old girl to take. You can imagine how desperately Mary

might have longed for someone whom she could talk to, who might believe her and help her. And she must have wondered about how her relative, the wife of a priest, would receive her.

After the 80-mile journey, Mary finally arrived at Elizabeth's home, and the encounter of the two women indicates to us the depth of their relationship. The scripture says, "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb." Then, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to Mary in a loud voice,

"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? ... And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Can you imagine the sense of relief Mary must have felt when she heard those words? All the fear and anxiety must have fallen off her shoulders. With a welcome like that, Mary would have known she could trust Elizabeth. That she could share with her all that had happened to her - the incredible visit and news delivered by the angel Gabriel. I am sure Mary's words, the encounter she had did not make sense to Elizabeth, but Elizabeth simply believed Mary. And she blesses Mary and the child in her womb, using the word, "blessed" 3 times. What a sight to behold! A woman who has conceived well passed the age of childbearing telling this teenage girl that she and her baby to be born out of wedlock is blessed among all women.

What is the common image of a blessed life? Of course, it's a comfortable life. When we count God's blessings, we name our health and wealth, our job, our business, our house, our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. But, Mary's blessedness did not have anything to do with an easy and comfortable life. Actually, it was the opposite. She was called to deliver a child out of wedlock, in a lowly manger no less. She would then have to flee to Egypt when King Herod tried to kill her child. She had to endure watching her son being constantly criticized by others, mobs wanting to kill him even in their hometown, and his dying on the cross.

About being blessed, Jesus says in the Gospel of Luke (6:20-22):

"Blessed are you who are poor...

Blessed are you who are hungry now...

Blessed are you who weep now...

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and say bad things about you and hurt you..."

Clearly, being blessed in the kingdom of God does not mean getting the things that can make your life easy and comfortable. Instead, it is about being part of God's plan; being used by God for the work of building God's kingdom.

Greatly encouraged by Elizabeth's acceptance, Mary responds to the words of blessing with a praise to God, which is known as *the Magnificat*.

Drawing from the song of Hannah, a faithful woman of God who was the mother of the prophet Samuel, found in 1 Samuel, chapter 2, Mary makes bold statements about God's character:

“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...”

Mary, who is singing this powerful song, is no longer a fearful teenager, but a brave mother who is carrying the Messiah in her womb. In the presence of Elizabeth who believed and trusted her, Mary’s fear faded away and she is now filled with great joy and hope.

“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.” (*Journey*, p.67)

For Mary, Elizabeth was her older mentor and guide. She listened to Mary without judging her. She accepted and encouraged her wholeheartedly. She blessed her again and again. She provided for her affirmation and perspective.

All of us need an Elizabeth in our lives, someone who is possibly older than us, someone whom we can freely turn to for encouragement, support, and guidance. And we all need to be an Elizabeth for someone who is possibly younger than us, who needs our encouragement, support, and guidance.

Who is your Elizabeth, who is it that serves as your mentor and guide? Who is your Mary whom you are encouraging and helping?

One of my Elizabeths was Rev. Barbara Danica, my mentor for my ordination process. Her church was only in 5 minutes away from my church. So, I could reach out to her whenever I had questions or concerns in my ministry, though we were to meet monthly. She always shared her thoughts candidly. Early in our relationship, I asked her about matters related to clergy taxes. She gave me a copy of her own tax file and said, “Here is mine. Just let me know if you have any questions.” I knew then I could fully trust her. She would always listen to me and encourage me. She was a great mentor. When I told her that someone complained about ministry, she said, “Don’t worry, Ouk-Yean. You are doing a great job. Just keep doing what you’re doing. Keep loving your people.” Unfortunately, she died of a cancer within a few years of our relationship. But, she continues to mentor me and give me encouragement in spirit.

One of my Marys is Rev. Ahyn Kim, a clergy in the Wisconsin Annual Conference. Unofficially, I am her mentor. I met her when she was in the seminary. She asked me to write a reference letter for her as she applied for a scholarship. Since then, we have continued our relationship. She knows she can contact me anytime she has a question or concern in her ministry. About a month ago, she texted me asking, “Can I call you Ouni?” Ouni is a Korean word for an older sister. She always called me Rev. Kim, my maiden name. But, as she now feels very close to me, she wants to call me with such affection!

As we celebrate this third Sunday of Advent and the theme of Joy which comes with lighting of the third candle, let us be joyful for the Elizabeths we have in our congregation. Our wonderful Sunday School teachers (and helpers) and Confirmation mentors, who sacrifice their time in a labor of love, to welcome and mentor our younger brothers and sisters in Christ. May you too experience the joy that Elizabeth felt when she received Mary with open arms.

And may we be joyful for the Marys in our midst as well. Our younger members who are boldly carrying with them the new seeds of faith. May you too experience the joy in your spirit that Mary felt when she received her many blessings from Elizabeth. For the new faith you carry will surely be a blessing for our community to celebrate and enjoy.

And may we be joyful for the testimony of Mary and Elizabeth, two amazing women who show us what it means to say yes to God and become blessings to each other and the world. Thanks be to God!