

Micah 5:2-5a
Luke 1:39-45

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year C
Midway Presbyterian Church
December 19, 2021

A Place to Nurture Faith

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

Our Old Testament Lesson today appears in a context that reflects hard times for the people of God, perhaps the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. But suddenly the prophet Micah speaks in tones of joy. Little Bethlehem, of small consequence in so many ways, will give to Israel the One who will rule in peace. Listen to these words from Micah 5:2-5a...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

On this last Sunday before Christmas, our expectations are heightened, especially by the scene in our Gospel Lesson, as two expecting women, Elizabeth and Mary, meet in an unnamed Judean village and marvel at the meaning of the birth of Mary's child. The stage is set for the fulfillment of ancient promises, as Elizabeth blesses Mary for believing that the promise would come true through her. Listen to these words from Luke 1:39-45...

Sermon

To any who are feeling lonely, fragmented, marginalized, or just tired, Luke offers a wonderful gift to unwrap this last Sunday before Christmas. It's a short story about the connection that was formed between two expecting women of different generations. The passage in chapter 1 is commonly known as "The Visitation." One woman is old, and her son will close an age; the other is young, and her Son will usher in a new one.

The scene is an unnamed town in the Judean hills where Mary meets with her older cousin Elizabeth. Mary knows about Elizabeth's condition because of the angel's declaration to her, of how Elizabeth in her old age and barren, had conceived a son. The two women offer confirmation and encouragement to each other.

I read a story about two couples who met in a hospital’s birthing class—one for first-time expectant parents. With the realization that they were the oldest couples in the class, they gravitated to each other. Dan and Teri, and Mark and Nancy, became good friends. Teri writes:

Nancy and I laughed together about the hospital’s label of us being of “advanced maternal age” at 35. Dan and Mark exchanged uncomfortable glances when the birthing videos were shown....Our babies were born days apart. Nancy and I continued to meet after the class to commiserate over the joys and struggles of mothering newborn infants. What I appreciated most about our friendship was that we could be straight-up honest with each other about how hard it was and how tired we were without fear of judgment. Pregnancy and parenting are full of blessings. But not every moment is magical. My friendship with Nancy was a much-needed help and support. (*Presbyterian Outlook*, Dec. 19, 2021)

We can see this kind of friendship as we read in our Gospel Lesson about Mary’s haste to see Elizabeth after the angel’s visit announcing the coming births of Jesus and John. Why does Mary go? For confirmation that the promise is true? For the nurturing wisdom of the older woman? For the privilege of helping Elizabeth through the last months of her pregnancy? For a mutual quickening of courage? For the sheer joy of it? Reasons such as these are among the very reasons we join together in the church to worship at Midway—confirmation of the promise, companionship with kindred hearts, the exchange of wisdom, support, courage, and joy.

Yes, Mary found a friend, another mother-to-be who could understand and encourage her. After all, babies can turn your world upside down, even when they’re not the Savior of the world.

When we go back to the first two chapters of Luke, some strange works unfold in the lives of the mothers of Jesus and John. First, Elizabeth, barren and advanced in years, receives the divine surprise of pregnancy. Then her cousin Mary is visited by the angel Gabriel, announcing “that she too would bear a son, who will be called Jesus.”

After Mary offers her unmistakable acceptance, “the angel left her,” seemingly alone, to ponder these things in her heart. But our individual promptings and experiences often need to be shared. Mary goes to her cousin Elizabeth. “The Visitation” is the first gathering of the community of Jesus. It invites us to recall how much we need each other, to draw fresh courage from each other, and to celebrate all that we share as bearers of the promise together.

The annunciation story no sooner ends than Mary makes an active choice. She has consented to Gabriel’s word and now wastes no time in doing something with it. The angel’s report of Elizabeth’s miraculous pregnancy came with no instruction to go to her. The visitation was Mary’s independent initiative. Given the length of the journey and no mention of traveling companions, it might well have been a risky one.

Elizabeth’s greeting is “Blessed are you among women,” a greeting of favor, of worthiness, of faithfulness and humble service. The other blessing conferred by Elizabeth is to call Mary’s encounter an event of *makarios*—“a life full of God.” Mary is to be full of divine life, love, and action. What’s her response? Holy wonder, marvel, spiritual rejoicing, singing aloud to God with a prophetic message (the “Magnificat”), not unlike that which her Son will preach in the years to come.

Furthermore, our text connects John the Baptist to Jesus: John leaps in Elizabeth’s womb in response to Mary’s greeting. The two women are a blessing to each other—two marginalized, pregnant women; one young and poor; the other of advanced maternal age, wife of a priest named Zachariah, a couple righteous before God and living blamelessly according to his commandments. (Lk 1:5-8) God gives Mary and Elizabeth what each most needs in this vulnerable moment—the gift of each other.

Why did we come to Worship this Fourth Sunday of Advent, this last Sunday before Christmas? To receive a blessing from God? An encouraging word? To share a joyful and hopeful time? To be with our church family—people we can be with and not fear their judgment, but rather cherish their acceptance. You don't have to be an expectant mother to understand these basic human needs. Mary and Elizabeth remind us of how we can be here for each other, how God doesn't just turn our lives upside down and then leave us all alone. "Blessed are you among women," Elizabeth says to Mary. And I say, blessed are we who gather with these women to be here for each other and to give God thanks and praise.

How many Marys and Elizabeths, or Zechariahs and Josephs, might there be sitting in church pews this Sunday, or at home wishing they could be in their church pew, awaiting an opportunity to connect more deeply with people around them? How many might be led to connect their small stories with the larger stories of God? While the world may push us relentlessly toward a louder, larger, and ever more expensive Christmas, much can be learned from sitting quietly and meditating upon this story of "The Visitation."

You newly elected Elders may know an element of fear and uncertainty as we are about to enter a new year. A year of community changes taking place before our very eyes. You will need to lead and serve these people through a challenging time. Truth is, there's no escape from change. In our personal lives and in the life of our communities. But remember this: you are not alone. You are with friends who will pray with you and for you. What a lonely job it would be, if you had only to rely on yourself and your own judgment. Happily, you don't have to do that. I don't have to do that. But even more important, remember that Emmanuel, God is with us. For even where two or three gather in his name, Christ is with us. His Spirit will love, care, and guide us. He will give us his peace.

Visiting one of our older members here at Midway a while back, I couldn't help but to be struck by her words revealing that she believed Midway to be a place of genuine caring. She said that she found here a community, a home, a place of belonging, a place to be connected to others, a place to be part of something larger than self, a place to nurture faith.

In the closing sentence of our Gospel Lesson, Elizabeth blesses Mary for believing what was spoken to her by the Lord. We recall Jesus' words, "If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you can move mountains. (Lk. 17:6)

But we know all too well that belief is not always easy. And sickness, sorrow, and suffering, or the sheer dead weight of the material world, can pull heavily the other way. But faith is our turning of the heart toward God. It is the quiet surrender of self to the Spirit of the Living God, the opening of the window for God's light to shine upon us. Mary was twice blessed: First, as the chosen mother of the Lord, and second, in believing.

Yes, even though the church does not have the standing it had in a former time, it can still play a vital role in providing community to people. The church can provide a place for people to listen and wait, a place to nurture faith. When we celebrate Holy Communion on Christmas Eve this Friday, we come together at the Table of our Lord—all are equal in status, all are children of God. We connect not only with one another and Christians throughout the world, but also with that Communion of Saints—those whom we have loved and lost, but for a while; who are now with God in his heavenly kingdom. Where every tear is dried, where sickness and sorrow and suffering are no more. Where we shall live eternally in the light of the One who was born to Mary on Christmas Day. And so we become, like her, the vessel of God's healing and wholeness, compassion and encouragement, comfort and strength, salvation and peace. And we provide a Place to Nurture Faith. Amen! And Amen!