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December 17, 2023

Scripture: Luke 1: 39-56

Sermon Title: The Wisdom and Joy of Two Women

Prayer...

Introduction:

Last week I enjoyed the opportunity to talk to you about the Angel Gabriel's visit to Mary. I reminded us that angels are real and even when we are not aware of them, they visit us and offer us comfort and guidance.

As I prepared the message for today, I looked back on the Angel Gabriel's message to Mary and how in addition to telling Mary that she will give birth to the Son of God, he also shares that her relative Elizabeth is pregnant.

This is significant because Gabriel is letting Mary know something special. He is letting Mary know that she is not alone. Another woman who is close to her is also experiencing an unexpected pregnancy. Mary chooses to go visit Elizabeth in order to receive support and what follows is a deep connection between the two of them.

I love the image of Mary being greeted by Elizabeth and having the baby in Elizabeth's womb leap for joy. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and pronounces to Mary that she is blessed among women.

Mary goes on to share her praise to God in a poetic message that mirrors a similar song by the Old Testament figure Hannah, who was the mother of Samuel the prophet.

Mary exclaims,

“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....Later on Mary highlights the Lord's heart for the oppressed. She shares, “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.”

After sharing her song of praise, Mary stays with Elizabeth for three months, which is about the time when John the Baptist is born to Elizabeth.

Both of these women support each other through their pregnancies. There is a special bond between them, since they are both women given great

opportunities, but also facing the real responsibility of raising up children that will have important callings from God.

As we look at this beautiful story of two women, Mary and Elizabeth, where do we see wisdom and where do we see joy?

We see wisdom is their humble posture to the gift of God. They are described as humble servants of God willing to be used to fulfill God's purposes.

They show wisdom as they praise the Lord and honor God's heart for the vulnerable and oppressed. These two women are devout Jews that show reverence to God and are willing to follow God with all their hearts. They are part of an oppressed group of people who are under Roman rule. As women, they face the challenge of being in a patriarchal society, yet they demonstrate great courage and hope.

They also show joy because they know what a gift it is to be shown favor from God. They celebrate the coming of the Savior of the World, the Messiah, and they are joyful as they are both filled with the Holy Spirit.

Despite the great challenges of their lives, they are given the gift of each other.

The friendship between these two relatives is powerful.

One of the joys of my life is that I am in a family with a lot of impactful women. My wife and daughters, my mom and sister all teach me so much of what I like to call the Sacred Feminine. Women are uniquely made in the image of God. They represent the feminine of God in the world. One of the reasons I talk about God using the image of both Mother and Father is to honor that women are made in God's image. One gift women often bring in my experience is an ability to form relationships. For many women, empathy comes naturally and tears flow more freely than some men I know. Men of course also have their uniqueness and value. I am supportive of the psychological and spiritual idea that we all are a mix of feminine and masculine natures, but today as we look at Mary and Elizabeth I want us to celebrate the wisdom of women. I want us to remember that women and men are both called to foster community and relationship. We do not need to be alone in our world.

Recently, I read a sermon by the Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber about the power of community among women. Part of the ministry of Nadia is her visitation of women in prison. I know some of you have a similar heart for ministry. Here is part of Nadia's reflection this Christmas about some women she visits in prison. She writes,

“I just keep thinking, I don’t feel very Christmas-y.

It’s like something is missing, or maybe just not fully snapping into place.

I know I am not alone...

But then yesterday afternoon, sitting in the common area of a unit at Denver Women’s Prison with 10 or so residents, all fellow members of New Beginnings Lutheran Church, we read part of the Magnificat, Mary’s song, from the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel.

My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has looked with favor on the lowly state 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;

indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

Then, in turn, each of these women spoke of their own experiences with mercy: the unfathomable forgiveness given by those who they have harmed, and what can feel like the impossibility of forgiving themselves, and the mercy they fear might never come, and the difficulty of remembering that they are forgiven, and their desperate prayers offered at two in the morning when they seem to struggle most with all of it.

So many tears came, and without anyone making a fuss about it, tissue-thin prison toilet paper passed from one to the other, quietly, reverently, like a sacrament.”

Nadia goes on to reflect on the power of mercy through the gift of community.

Another story that I read about women coming together for support, comes from the devotional we are reading together here at church put together by the Frontier Fellowship mission organization. The Advent devotional reflects on the hymn Canticle of the Turning, which is based on Mary’s Magnificat. The Hymn includes the words,

“My soul cries out with a joyful shout, that the God of my heart is great, and my spirit sings of the wondrous things that you bring to the ones who wait...could the world be about to turn? Though the nations rage from age to age we

remember who holds us fast; God's mercy must deliver us from the conqueror's crushing grasp. This saving word that our forebears heard is the promise which hold us bound, till the spear and rod can be crushed by God who is turning the world around."

Our devotional goes on to explain that many Yazidi women in Iraq and Syria were forced into unwanted marriages and slavery by fundamentalist religious groups, resulting in a high rate of suicide among the women. The hopeful news is that Egyptian church planters are organizing women's empowerment camps and counseling centers, extending the healing, hope, and new life of the Promised Savior to Yazidi women and others devastated by war in the region.

Friends, part of the Reformation of the Church today involves women leading the church to address injustice through the wisdom and joy of community. The present and future of the Church is to be a co-partnership between women and men, girls, and boys where all people are equal in leadership and where special consideration is taken to listen and be led by the voice of women in our world. Everybody has a place in this world, but it is important to understand that the movement of the Holy Spirit has always been to especially empower women,

since they have experienced less power and privilege. Remember, one name we give for the Holy Spirit is Sophia, which is embodied in the book of Proverbs as Lady wisdom.

As we continue to celebrate the joy of the Advent Season, let us rejoice with Mary and Elizabeth that the Savior of the World has come to offer us favor and great joy.

May we carry in the womb of this church, an openness to all that God wants to birth in this place. May we be willing to share the peace and love of Christ with all creation and to especially honor the wisdom and joy of women.

In the Name of God our Mother and Father we pray, AMEN.



Luke 1:39-56

### Mary Visits Elizabeth

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be[a] a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

46 And Mary[b] said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.

Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name;

50 indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones

and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things

and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has come to the aid of his child Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

56 And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her

home.