

Two Mothers and One Brave New World

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Fourth Sunday of Advent - December 18, 2022

Texts: Luke 1:39-45, Luke 1:46-55

Luke 1:39-45, 56-58

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt 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. 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 leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home. Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

GOSPEL READING Luke 1:46-55

And Mary and Elizabeth sang,

'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.

His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

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.

He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

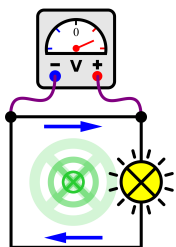
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

Dearly beloved. I love saying that. Dearly beloved of God and of one another, my heart is very full this week. So full, I'm not sure I can explain it, but I will try.



I think it has to start with the story of these two women, two mothers: old Elizabeth who was unable to conceive and somehow is expecting a child. Young Mary who is unmarried and somehow is expecting a child. And the love that flows between them. The blessing that flows between them. Mary runs to Elizabeth, and Elizabeth greets Mary on the threshold of her house, on the threshold of enormous change in both their lives, on the threshold of one brave new world that is God's blessing on the lowly, the weak, and the hungry. And even though most people say Mary sang the Magnificat, the song of praise to the God of that brave new world, some people think it was Elizabeth. Me? I know they sang it together, Liz's strong alto and Mary's soaring soprano. And singing together, they completed the circle of God's blessing to the world.

You see, I think we sometimes get confused about what blessing is. People who hold to a form of Christianity called "the prosperity gospel" like to say, "I'm blessed." Meaning, "If I get something good, it must mean God loves me and I deserve it." Now I, myself, don't question that all good things come from God and that God loves all people. That is most certainly true.

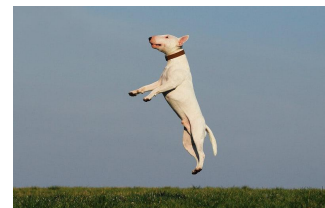


What I do question is the efficacy of the blessing if the blessing stops and stays with me. I think it's kind of like electricity. (Apologies here to the engineers among us for my 3rd grade illustration.) Bob, who is patient and understands science better than me, says electricity that runs in a complete circle makes things work: your electric light, or your electric heater. Turning on the switch completes the circle. Voila! Light! Heat! Electricity used like that is helpful, useful. Static electricity, like the little sparks from your carpet in winter, or the massive surge of energy in lightning, can be just a little shocking or hugely destructive. Lethal, even.



Nothing in the universe is more powerful than God's love. If we receive God's love and blessings and pass them along, completing the circle, they light up that brave new world that God has been creating all along. The trap is when we start to believe God loves and blesses us because we deserve it all; we smugly think the sheer fact of getting something good proves *we're* good. We gobble up those good blessings and hoard them until we are bloated with money and power, and then what was good turns destructive. In the old but true cliché, we are blessed to be a blessing. When the two mothers, Mary and Elizabeth, shared their blessings, what came out of them was the song of God's brave new world. God's world lights up every time blessings are passed along and shared.

Here's the *current* example I need to tell you about today, and the reason my heart is so full. As you know, with Session's leadership, we decided to tithe the blessing that came to us through Margaret Nelson's generosity. This week, the committee shared that blessing with two groups. The biggest portion went to the Women's Shelter and Support Center, \$40,000—enough for them to buy a reliable van to replace the old broken one, to take their children safely to school and moms to appointments and interviews. Mary Alice, who delivered the check, said the staff were literally jumping with joy. Tears of happiness flowed on all sides. They want to tell the world what God has done through us. As one member of the 3M committee put it: "WOW! When we give, we are really the winners."



The remainder of the 10% went to Gage East. We delivered that check on Thursday night when seven of us joined the staff in serving Christmas dinner to the residents. I wish I could show you pictures of the residents, of the adorable, hyped up kids, and the tender mamas and papas, but that would invade their privacy. I can share our folks and their hardworking dedicated staff.



It occurred to me that all three groups: the women's shelter, Gage East, and CPC are made up of people on the threshold of new lives. Women and children escaping situations of domestic violence, caught for years in that soul-killing trap, are now bravely



stepping out into a new world of self-worth and independence. Families, some of them homeless or underhoused for generations, are learning to stand on their own with dignity. And we here at CPC are standing on a threshold of change, looking forward to a new world, a brave new world where blessings are shared and passed along to others. When we throw open the door, we throw the switch to complete the circuit of love. When we do, the lowly are lifted up, the hungry eat their fill, and the rich are sent away empty. Light and warmth are shared, fullness is complete. The brave new world appears.

And each of us stands on our own threshold daily, don't we? You can awaken each new morning with the confidence that God's love, more powerful than the fusion energy in a thousand suns, will enable you to complete the connection that illuminates the world. When we give, we are really the winners. When we dwell together in charity and love, God dwells with us.

Please join me in a breath prayer. Inhale: God's love to me. Exhale: God's love through me.

 CWU Chamber Choir: Ola Gjeilo, Ubi Caritas (unaccompanied)

Image credits

Mary and Elizabeth, by Lauren Wright Pittman. From **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. 2018

Visitation, by Liz Valente. From **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. 2021.

Liz Valente is a liturgical artist, wife and mother of 4 children; she has a master's degree in architecture and urbanism and is a professor of drawing for training architects at higher education levels. She works on several artistic fronts, such as theater, visual arts and music, having created the album "Pipa Amarela", released in 2013. She has worked with teenagers and young people at the Presbyterian Church of Viçosa, Brazil, where her husband serves as a pastor.

The Golden Cradle (bulletin cover and final slide), by Carmelle Beaugelin. *A Sanctified Art*, From Generation to Generation.

All others in the public domain

Music: Ubi Caritas, Ola Gjeilo. UCW Chamber choir

Prayers:

Come, Jesus, Emmanuel, and make our joy complete. Connect our lives powerfully with others, let us be the conduit for the blessings you have showered so abundantly on our lives and our nation. May your birth be the birth of charity and love, may you dwell with your people always.

In this season of homegoings and gatherings, we thank you for the gift of relationships, we thank you for hearts built to love one another. We thank you for people who have crossed thresholds and thrown doors open for us, who call us blessed. We thank you for those who have reminded us what love looks like in a hurting world.

We thank you for inspiring the good work of the Women's Shelter and of Gage East and others who strive for safety, dignity, and purpose in the lives of others. May their work prosper as they share their blessings, too.

Protect those who travel, or who suffer the ravages of weather or of war; bring reconciliation where there is strife, and let us be the bearers of good news to all in need.

Our Father and Mother in heaven...