

**Sermon: Dec 17, 2017 (Advent 3)****Carol-Ann Chapman, Nobleton/Schomberg United Church****Luke 1: 39-45 (NRSV)**

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 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. 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."

**Luke 1:46-55** is referred to as the Magnificat or Mary's Song. Mary's song of praise is a response to her pregnancy and her awareness of the significance and hope that this child will bring to the world

"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 forever.”

**Holy is His Name (Lyrics by John Michael Talbot, based on Luke 46-55)**

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord  
And my spirit exalts in God my Savior  
For He has looked with mercy on my loneliness  
And my name will be forever exalted  
For the mighty God has done great things for me  
And His mercy will reach from age to age

And holy, holy, holy is His name

He has mercy in every generation  
He has revealed His power and His glory  
He has cast down the mighty in their arrogance  
And has lifted up the meek and the lonely  
He has come to help His servant Israel  
He remembered His promise to our fathers

And holy, (holy) holy, holy is His name  
Holy, holy, holy is His name

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The text found immediately before Mary’s trip to see her cousin Elizabeth, tells of how Mary has been visited by the angel Gabriel. She has been told that God has found favor with her and that she will conceive and bear a son that will be named Jesus. This Scripture reading from the book of Luke is the only one found in the four Gospels which offers the story from Mary’s point of view.

In this day and age it is a little difficult to understand what it would have meant for Mary to be pregnant and not be married. Today, it is not so unusual for a couple to live together without being married by ceremony. There are single mothers and single fathers raising children...some by choice and some by

circumstances. We are fortunate to live in a time when many types of families are accepted....but it was not so long ago that things were very different. When I was young it was rare for two parents to live together without being married. Having a child as a single woman was frowned upon. My own birth mother went to a home for unwed mothers before she gave birth to me and gave me up for adoption. That was what many did in the 1960's. I've heard stories of women who "went away" to a relative's house...or the infamous "shot-gun" wedding. It was not so long ago that women were scorned or shamed if they gave birth "out of wedlock." So multiply that and go back 2000 years ago...when one can only imagine what it would have been like for a woman like Mary....A time when women had virtually zero rights. Of course we don't know exactly what life was like for Mary...but she was likely very young...some say as young as twelve. Being "betrothed" or engaged was a solid commitment and for such a relationship to come to an end would have been shameful and Mary would have had no say in the matter. It is unlikely that there was a great love story between her and Joseph. More than likely, Mary had been offered to an older Joseph who would have offered a betrothal gift as a purchase price. In effect, the engagement and subsequent marriage was a business agreement...and if Joseph had felt that he'd been duped into his agreement, he could have chosen to break the contract and Mary might have been exiled...or worse.

So it is difficult to understand how a woman...who was on the verge of being ostracized or banished could write such beautiful words...the Magnificat...a song of praise to God as a response to the miracle of her pregnancy, a song that has been shared through various creative pieces including the song we heard this morning by John Michael Talbot. When we understand that Mary was

really facing such uncertainty, it is difficult to comprehend how she could have possibly found so much joy during a pregnancy that could cause her nothing but trouble.

The classic answer as to how she could feel so uplifted at such a tenuous time might be that Mary had great faith and put her hope in God. Somehow...perhaps through her brief encounter with the angel Gabriel, she just knew that this child would change the world...that she believed the child in her womb, would come to turn things upside down and bring the powerful down from their thrones and lift the lowly and feed the hungry. The prophetic voice of Mary may be predicting the Holy future of the blessed child she is carrying

*Authors Borg and Crossan wrote a book called "The First Christmas" which offers some suggestions on ways we can look at the Nativity stories through a different lens. Borg suggests that Luke's Gospel story is not a factual account of the experiences of Mary and Elizabeth, but instead what it may be is a Parable. And like the parables of Jesus, it is a story that is supposed to teach us how to live.<sup>1</sup> What seems to be an important aspect of this introduction to the birth of Jesus in the book of Luke is the relationship between two women of faith.*

Yes Mary responded with a song of faith, but isn't it possible that beneath her praise, that she was really a frightened young girl?

The first thing that Mary does when she discovers the news about her divine pregnancy is go to see Elizabeth...a relative, possibly her cousin...someone she was close to and had a relationship with. Elizabeth was older and likely someone Mary trusted. Elizabeth perhaps a wiser more mature woman who had experienced her own struggles around pregnancy. Someone whose faith also ran

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<sup>1</sup> The First Christmas-Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fk90WDo90\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fk90WDo90_0)

deep like Mary's. Elizabeth was someone who would believe Mary, even though her news seemed strange and unlikely. Elizabeth was someone who could relate to Mary and walk with her on this rather unusual walk of faith.

Advent is a time of waiting, a time pregnant with hope. On this Third Sunday of Advent, Mary and Elizabeth can be seen as two ordinary, pregnant women in the most extraordinary time and circumstances, on the brink of greatness but like the parables of Jesus this is a story about real people and real circumstances and what is at the center of the story are two women whose primary task is to be in relationship with each other during a trying and difficult time. Motherhood is daunting to every woman, especially the first time around, and these two women have found themselves pregnant under most unusual and unexpected circumstances. One has discovered herself to be with child long past the age to conceive, and the other carrying a child, yet still a virgin. So, like women in every place and time, they spend time together, keeping each other company, learning and praying and perhaps laughing together, as they face first-time childbirth and motherhood.

*The new life promised in Mary's pregnancy, of course, is the focus of Luke's story, as it fulfills promises to all humankind, but one wonders how these two humble women must have felt about what was happening in their own lives. Theologian Henri Nouwen says about this interaction, "Who could ever understand? Who could ever believe it? Who could ever let it happen? But Mary says, 'Let it happen to me', and she immediately realizes that only Elizabeth will be able to affirm her 'yes.' For three months Mary and Elizabeth live together and encourage each other to truly accept the*

*motherhood given to them." As Nouwen reads this story, neither woman had to wait alone for the extraordinary events to unfold, slowly, as pregnancies do: "They could wait together and thus deepen in each other their faith in God, for whom nothing is impossible. Thus, God's most radical intervention into history was listened to and received in community."*

*In this Advent season, we're keenly aware that we wait in community for the promises of God to unfold in our lives. Here, in community, we hold each other up when one of us needs encouragement or support. We help one another search for meaning, rejoice with one another, walk alongside each other. Just as Elizabeth must have listened to Mary, and helped her prepare for what was to we help one another work things out. Sometimes, we just sit in the dark quiet and wait, together, trusting in the promises of God, listening for a word from the Still speaking God. And in the midst of our waiting, as... Mary sang God's praise; and as Elizabeth welcomed her beloved cousin and companion, we rejoice, our hearts dancing within us. That is the way that we move with Mary's song.<sup>2</sup>*

Mary was joyous in her song...she believed in God, but she did not believe alone. As powerful and uplifting her song about God is, she likely had doubts and questions and wondered how exactly she was going to get through the time...but she did not have to do it alone...she did it in community...with another...someone else who could hold her hand, believe in her and in God's plan for the future. Today, this final week before Christmas we look forward to what is to come. Advent can be a time to wonder...about our faith and about God but we do not

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<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Matthews, *Moving With Mary's Song*. [http://www.ucc.org/weekly\\_seeds\\_moving\\_with\\_marys\\_song](http://www.ucc.org/weekly_seeds_moving_with_marys_song)

have to do it alone...because we have a community...here today...others who will walk beside us on our journey. There may be many reasons one decides to attend church, to be part of a faith community....it is the community that is the greatest gift...being connected with others when life brings us uncertainty...others who will be there as we ponder questions of faith, a community who finds joy in a God of justice and love. It is in relationship together that we can find the joy and share it with others...just as Mary did with Elizabeth and her song.