



Sermon, December 22, 2024

In early February 1980, there was bad winter storm. My Mom went into labor three months early. As an ER nurse, she knew the only place that would stand a chance at keeping the babies alive was University Hospital in Minneapolis. My Dad took Mom in the car and started the trip to Minneapolis. It was near white-out conditions and travel was not advised. My Dad hopped on the radio to say that he would not pull off the road, so do not try to stop him. A trucker nearby told my Dad to pull in behind him. He would lead them through the storm. And so he did. This angel wearing street clothes guided my parents in a storm, where the miles ahead were very unclear.

In the Gospel story for today, it is easy to focus on the encounter between Gabriel and Mary, or the way that the baby in Elizabeth's womb jumped for joy. Instead, I want to focus on the relationship between Elizabeth and Mary. The angel announces to Mary that Elizabeth, in her older age, is about to have a baby. She is invited to see that as a sign. Mary travels there, which would have taken some time. She cannot simply drive there, hop on a bus, a plane, or take an Uber. As she arrives, the two women share an embrace and a, well, song. Apart from this, not much is said.

For both women, this is a vulnerable time. They are preparing to give birth, one in older age, and the other outside of wedlock. Both would have been experiencing anxiety and joy at the same time. There is joy in the midst of a storm. The miles ahead seem unclear. In the moment, they have each other.

The text then drops a very subtle line, "And Mary remained with her about 3 months." What is 6 (and a half) plus 3? It is a subtle acknowledgement that Mary remained there, likely, until after John was born. Elizabeth, in the midst of her own uncertainty, was not only visited by Mary, but that she remained there through the remainder of the pregnancy. Mary functioned as a sort of spiritual midwife to Elizabeth during this time of uncertainty. Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, was struck mute. That would have caused enough problems. You have the risks of pregnancy later in life. There is uncertainty all around. Mary stays as a guide to Elizabeth.

I do not believe this was a one-sided relationship. The first trimester of a pregnancy is filled with vulnerability. Quite often, the couple keeps the news quiet until after three months have passed. There are way too many risks in these early weeks. I find myself thinking that Elizabeth was a spiritual guide for Mary as well. These two women, at a vulnerable point in their lives, serve as a guide to each other. In a time when the miles ahead seemed unclear, they helped each other get to where they need to be.

What we find through the whole of this story is that the relationship between these families continues. Before Jesus even begins to imagine ministry, John is preparing the way. John functions as a guide so that Jesus finds where to begin. There is this sense of connection, guiding one another in times of need.

I find myself drawn back to the story of that truck driver, an angel in street clothes. In many ways, that is what Advent is all about. Advent speaks of an arrival. We typically view that as the arrival of the Christ child. I am not diminishing that. The story of the Mary and Elizabeth, the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, and the story of the birth. All have within them the story of angels in street clothes, helping those around them. In some ways, that is the whole point of the incarnation, to live among us. To show that we can be beacons of God's love in the world around us. Through us the love of God can be made known.

This week we will journey with Mary and Joseph toward Bethlehem. We will prepare for the birth of Christ. I pray that we may also be changed. I pray we can see clearly the ways that we can be of help to those around us. I pray that this close of Advent marks the arrival of a sense of hope, a sense that we can make the love of God real. It may feel stormy at times, and the miles ahead may seem uncertain. May we help one another see the love of God and find our way forward, together. Amen.

Pastor Michael Schmidt