

“WHAT CAN I GET YOU FOR CHRISTMAS? II – A HUG”

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Luke 1:39-56

I've always loved the name Elizabeth. It's actually my sister's middle name. My parents chose that middle name for her because it's a name borne by a lot of women in my father's family. My middle name is Frances, which is from my mother's family – it was actually her mother's name. While I love it, and I love that I'm named after Grandma Davenport, I have to admit that there were times I was jealous that Susan got Elizabeth for her middle name. It is so beautiful. But I have to tell you, I love it even more because of today's Gospel lesson, and one of the central characters in it – Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary. It is a beautiful story, and Elizabeth is truly a beautiful, beautiful person.

Go with me for just a minute back to last Sunday's Gospel lesson and you'll remember that Mary has just had an encounter with an angel telling her that God had chosen her to bear his Son into the world. She wrestled with that call before she finally said “yes” to God. That happens in Luke, chapter 1, verse 38.

In verse 39, the start of this week's lesson, the very next thing that Luke tells us is that Mary leaves to visit her cousin Elizabeth, and he puts it this way: that she went “with haste.” That tells us something, doesn't it? Mary needed to get away, and get to someone she trusted, someone she loved. She needed to get to someone who maybe knew a little bit about what she was going through – after all, remember that Elizabeth is also pregnant, and well past the age she ever thought she would be able to have a child.

Now, you need to know something else. This was no small journey, this wasn't a short trip to the next town. Elizabeth and Zechariah her husband lived 80 – 90 miles away from Mary's family. Knowing that little fact changes everything, doesn't it? It was a huge trip in that day and age. Young, alone, pregnant, walking, riding on an animal, or finding a ride on a cart of some sort – any way you look at it, it was a big, big journey and took some time. Which lets us know that making this trip was really, really important to Mary, and really, really urgent for her.

And just think about all the time that she had over the course of that long journey to mull over her situation, and consider all the ramifications. You know what it likes when you have too much time on your hands and you have a problem, you can come up with some pretty scary prospects in your mind! Oh, my, Mary so needed someone to settle her down and center her, and help her.

The great preacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes about the moment that Mary reached Elizabeth's door in such a wonderful way that I want you to hear it. She writes: "When she finally arrives at Elizabeth's, Mary is a wreck, but at the sight of her beloved cousin, she forgets all her woes. Elizabeth is six months pregnant and gorgeous. Not gorgeous by ordinary standards, you understand, but so full of life it is hard to see much beyond her joy. Her gray hair is plaited and tied under a kerchief, and as she takes Mary's hands in hers the girl can see dark spots on them, the kind that come with age. Elizabeth's face too, shows her years, but her eyes are clear and full of light. She sees Mary staring at her big belly and laughs out loud. 'Blessed are you among women,' Elizabeth exclaims, 'and blessed is the fruit of your womb.'"

"What? Mary can hardly believe her ears! (Taylor continues) Has the angel been there too? How does Elizabeth know? And if she knows, why isn't she troubled about it as well? Can't she see what a mess this is going to be, how much explaining there is going to be? But Elizabeth needs no explanation at all. Without asking a single question, she takes her young cousin in her arms and lets her know that everything, finally, will be all right. Then Mary's stomach does another flip, and she feels a song coming on. This is one of the effects total acceptance has on the soul, you see. Your foot starts tapping and mere words will not suffice – you want music: a saxophone, a brass band, an entire symphony to accompany your outpouring of gladness. In just such a frame of mind, Mary opens her mouth and begins to sing, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.'" (Barbara Brown Taylor, *Mixed Blessings*, "Magnificat," p. 35)

Oh my – what if Elizabeth has said something different? What if she had greeted Mary quietly and then, quickly ushered her inside so she wouldn't be seen by others, because well, her husband Zechariah was a prominent and respected person in their village, and here was her young, unwed, pregnant cousin? Or what if she had said nothing, when Mary so desperately needed her so much?

Any of those things could have happened, but thanks be to God, they didn't. Elizabeth's words of love and encouragement touched Mary to the core of her being, and released in her joy, abundant joy and praise, which she sang out to God. Knowing that love, feeling that acceptance and encouragement, changed everything for Mary, and she was able to go back home and do what God asked of her – in a marvelous, marvelous way.

Oh friends, all of us need to hear words of encouragement every once in a while. They are so important, and sometimes they are life changing. All of us need to know that there is someone who loves us, supports us, and has our back.

Over the course of this week, as I've been working on this sermon, I've had the chance to ask a number of people, who had encouraged them? And when I did, the stories came pouring out. Parents, siblings, friends. Teachers, coaches, co-workers. Everyone I talked to, after a little while to think about it, remembered a

moment or moments when a person encouraged them – and it made all the difference in the world to them.

I heard what a difference it made to one person whose parents said “You can be anything you want to be,” as opposed to another’s who, not only didn’t encourage them, but put them down all the time. I heard about a woman who had gone through her life thinking she was ugly, until one day, a person told her what a pretty face she had, and it absolutely, positively changed the way she saw herself and felt about herself. I heard about a person going into a church for the very first time, all alone, being scared to death, and a member took the time to talk to her and make her feel welcome – and from that day to this, she has never stopped coming.

Words of encouragement mean everything – absolutely everything. And don’t kid yourself – everybody needs to be encouraged. There is no one so self-assured, so all together, that they don’t need encouragement – everybody needs to be encouraged. Mary needed it on that day long ago – and received it so beautifully from her cousin Elizabeth. It turned her uncertainty and anxiety into joy and peace!

Friends, our world needs “Elizabeths” now more than ever. Times are tough right now. I can almost not bear to watch the news these days – so many bad things happening almost every day. It’s enough to make us want to crawl inside a hole and stay there. It’s enough to make us afraid and insecure. It’s enough to make us question ourselves and our abilities –

Which is why we need more Elizabeths – and – which is why we need to be Elizabeths! You and I. We need to take every opportunity we can to encourage others – to lift them up, to soothe their anxieties, to help them see their potential, to let them know they are loved. We need to take every opportunity we can to share the love that God has poured on us with them, because on any given day, you or I could be the one person that says something nice to them, encourages them in any way.

One pastor said this: “Elizabeth’s encouragement allows Mary to see that she is blessed, that God is working in her present situation, and once she is able to see that, then she is able to hope and trust that God is working in the future as well to make sure suffering and injustice will not have the last word.” (On-line, “Enabling Joy,” Ocone Street UMC)

Oh, that our words of encouragement can help others around us in these days “hope and trust that God is working in the future as well to make sure suffering and injustice will not have the last word.” In our world, where suffering and injustice these days seem to daily rear their ugly heads, we need to be Elizabeths, bearers of love and encouragement to all whom we meet.

Mary’s spirit rejoiced with song after Elizabeth encouraged her. May you and I live in such a way that our encouragement may enable others around us to find their songs too! May it be so. Amen.

