



Mary's Visit to Elizabeth
Luke 1:39-56
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This is for all you science buffs: Scientists tell us that there is an amazing, inexplicable phenomenon called “quantum entanglement.” If two particles of energy are kept in close proximity to each other for a long time, they form a relationship, a bond.

The connection between these two particles is so strong that if you take one particle to a laboratory in Los Angeles and remove the other one to a lab in New York City, whatever you do to the particle in L.A. will instantly happen to the one in New York, too. Einstein had a very scientific name for this phenomenon; he called it “spooky.” Once particles form this kind of bond, it cannot be severed no matter how great the distance between the two becomes.

Spooky.

A similar but opposite thing happened between Mary and Elizabeth. In this case, two separate people formed a relationship across a great distance, but eventually the relationship drew them together in a bond that would never be broken.

You wouldn't think so at first. They were cousins, but there was a great age difference. Elizabeth was thought to be in her 50s; Mary, 13-14 years of age. They lived 100 miles apart. In those days it took 10 days to travel that distance. They probably met in the past through family gatherings or Jewish festivals. But you know how it is at these gatherings – the kids hang out together; the adults hang out together. Rarely do they mix and mingle. Does this happen at your family gatherings?

But something remarkable—something filled with holy mystery—happened to both of these women. Despite their geographic and chronological distance from each other, these two formed a bond—a bond that would last the rest of their lives. Elizabeth carrying John the Baptist who would prepare the way for the child Mary is carrying.

And they found a joy, a deep-seated joy in this holy mystery. Let's read about their encounter. Before we do, join me in prayer.

Prayer: O God, who comes among us and who is still yet to come, as the days grow ever shorter and the nights ever longer, we cling to the promise of the light that is coming into the world. Let every heart here prepare a room for you and sing for joy. Amen.

Read Luke 1:39-56

Two weeks ago, we read the passage where Mary is told by the angel that she will bear God's Son. This is not exactly happy news because Mary is not married, and in her culture, getting pregnant out of wedlock can be a sentence of death to the mother.

Mary is frightened. How will she tell her parents, her fiancé Joseph, her friends, her relatives? Nobody will believe her. What a silly story – God made me pregnant! Even if she isn't put to death, she faces shame, embarrassment and being shunned.

Mary then remembers what the angel told her. Her cousin, Elizabeth, is having a baby, too. Elizabeth, probably in her fifties, barren, never been able to have child, is now pregnant. The angel did say nothing is impossible with God. Right? If anyone could understand and maybe believe Mary, it is Elizabeth.

Mary sets off on 100-mile journey, taking 10 days. In those ten days, I can imagine Mary filled with dread and doubt, fear and anxiety. Will Elizabeth believe her? And Joseph lives in a neighboring town. She will certainly have to see him, and tell him her news. No fiancé will believe such a story.

We read what happened. After the ten-day journey, Mary arrives and calls out to Elizabeth in greeting. As she does so, the baby in Elizabeth (about 6 months along) leaps with joy, and Elizabeth through the Holy Spirit knows exactly what has happened to Mary: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! “Blessed!

Mary is so relieved that she is filled with thanksgiving and joy, and breaks out into song.

Mary shows us how to respond when God breaks into our lives. Mary also shows us that the call of God or God breaking into our lives is not always a happy or easy occurrence. Think about Mary being blessed. Her blessing is becoming pregnant out of wedlock in a culture that does not tolerate such things.

We often think of being blessed as such things as material wealth, happiness, health, friends, family, ease and comfort. We learned a new term in The Journey classes (a term coined by William Barclay): “The paradox of Blessedness.” Mary’s blessing is to carry a child that is not Joseph’s. Her blessing includes escaping to Egypt when Herod seeks to destroy the child. Her blessedness includes watching her son die on a cross.

The author of our book “The Journey” warns us to be careful when we ask for God’s blessing. Or, maybe I need to be careful when I sign my emails “Blessings, Diane.” Because it always doesn’t mean comfort or ease, but it does mean being a part of God’s plan in the world.

With the paradox of blessedness in Mary’s life, she has been chosen to be a part of God’s plan. To carry the Messiah. To be used by God for God’s purposes. To raise the Son of God. And because of Elizabeth, Mary discovers her destiny and finds overwhelming joy.

Do you want to be blessed?

I have found that in the call to be a pastor there is a paradox of blessedness. In the call, there is great joy and blessing. I get to lead all of you in worship before

God. I get to share God's word with you. I get to watch God work in your hearts and minds and souls. Nothing gives me more pleasure than to hear how you are drawing closer to the Lord. I get to walk with people and their families at the end of their lives.

Yet, this blessing has been a paradox. My blessing includes moving away from family and friends in my hometown, rarely getting to spend holidays with them. My blessing includes being let go from my first pastoral position because the senior pastor didn't want to work with me.

My blessing includes moving to a place I disliked: New Jersey, where I discovered that I will never make a good Easterner. My blessing has included the death of two of my colleagues as I ministered with them. Yet, like Mary, despite the difficulties and sadness, I have found great joy and fulfillment in this calling and blessing.

Have you found your joy? Did you know there is a difference between joy and happiness? Happiness depends on our circumstances. We are happy when things go well in our lives.

But joy, joy is different. Joy is not dependent on external circumstances. Joy comes from God and is a deep confidence in the presence of God in our life and in the world. Joy comes from viewing our circumstances through the eyes of faith. Joy wells up from within us, and is still there even on our worst days. Joy is there for us to experience and draw strength from no matter the circumstances. It is the confidence that God is ultimately in charge....of everything.

Our church has found its joy despite our circumstances: the joy of knowing that God is at work with us, and will never leave nor abandon us; the joy of knowing that God is making us a new people; that God is doing a new thing. And we can cry out as Mary did:

Our soul glorifies the Lord and our spirit rejoices in God our Savior."

Therefore, our theme this Christmas is joy. You saw it on the cover of our December newsletter. You see it on the panels above the welcome desks at the main entrances. And at the end of this week, 20,000 homes in Green Valley will receive our Joy Postcard inviting them to celebrate joy with us at our Christmas Eve Services. (show postcard)

By the way, we have extras of these postcards. They are at the Welcome Centers for you to take (as many as you want), and give to friends and neighbors. It is a way for you to invite them to our Christmas Eve services, and you can say to them, "Yes, we have had a difficult time, but we are experiencing joy. Come and experience it with us."

So, back to Mary's song of joy. Take a look at that first statement: "My soul glorifies the Lord." What does it mean to glorify the Lord? Actually I like the word other translations use - magnify:

My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

This is why Mary's song is called the Magnificat, which comes from the Latin word that means magnify. What does it mean to magnify the Lord in our lives?

Some of you may use a magnifying glass to help you see things. My mother uses a pretty big magnifying glass to help her read. Magnification doesn't literally make things bigger. It alters our perception of an object, making it appear bigger to us.

Mary sings in joy that her soul magnifies the Lord. Magnifying God doesn't make God appear bigger. It means seeing God as big as God is. Last summer, I went with Eloise Fredrickson to Kitt Peak's night program. We looked through a telescope. I can still feel the wonder and awe at the moment I saw the rings around Saturn...live...not in a picture....but for real! The magnification allowed me to see Saturn as it really is.

We are to magnify God like a telescope, to see God as God really is.

Psalm 34:3 “O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together.”

Over and over again, the Old Testament saints and prophets tell us to magnify the Lord. The New Testament does, too. “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do to the glory of God.” (I Cor 10:31) That is, do everything so God may be magnified. Think, act, feel in a way that will make God look as great as God really is.

In The Journey classes this past week, I asked the participants: What does it mean to magnify or glorify God? One of the participants, Sandy Clark, went home and thought about the question. She wrote her answer in an email to me. I quote a part of it:

“When I visited the Field of the Shepherds in Israel, I sense the spectacular event that occurred there and was filled once again with awe and impressive peace. God’s presence can be felt here. God’s presence was felt in the rock I chose the other day when I was thinking about gratitude to God for his creation...The longer I held it, the warmer it became, the stronger I felt a relationship with God. ...I believe [the glory of God] is the result of experiencing God with all our human sensations and awe of our souls...perhaps Mary expressed this experienced encounter with the angel with her feelings of deep joy.”

We magnify God by making God greater in our thoughts, in our affections, in our memories, and in our expectations. We magnify God with praise and telling others about His greatness so they can glorify God, too.

Mary is our example. Instead of focusing on the misery that made her feel smaller, she magnified the Lord. Instead of resignation, she rejoices in God her Savior. Instead of hopelessness because God has turned her life upside down, she shouts hallelujah because God has been mindful of her humble state. Even though this small baby inside of her is going to turn her world upside down, she accepts it with a Magnificat and is blessed beyond her wildest dreams. “From now on all generations will call me blessed.”

God gave Mary a song. A song not just about Mary, but about God breaking into history, about God breaking into our lives. It is a song for the humble, the helpless, the hungry, for all humanity.

How are you being called to sing a new song this Christmas, so that your soul might ever more fully *magnify* God?

Psalm 69:30 "I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving."