

“Elizabeth, Celebrating”

Luke 1: 39–47; 57–64

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Third Sunday in Advent

Everybody has their favorite Sundays of the year. One of my favorites is the third Sunday in Advent. It is the day we light the Pink Candle. Why the pink candle? They used to treat Advent like a mini-version of Lent. People were very pensive, very contrite. The Pink Candle was added centuries ago to remind people that sometime in Advent, to truly be prepared for Christmas, we need to practice celebrating. To laugh. Pink Candle Sunday is the day we lift up in prayer the Humor Impaired, and pray for their healing.

That is part of what it takes to help us prepare for the birth of the baby Jesus. So many churches always put on Christmas pageants.

My preaching professor, William Meuhl was not a pastor. He was a lawyer. Wanted us to make our case. He tells the story of his son in his preschool’s Christmas pageant. The Preschool was a bit less focused on theological accuracy, and more on involving all the children. So, as the school had three costumes for the Virgin Mary, and two for Joseph. Hence, when it was time for pageant to begin, there were 3 Marys and two Josephs. Less like the holy family, and more starting squad on a basketball team.

Professor Meuhl’s son did not make first team, the Marys and Joseph’s. He did not make second team – the angels. He was third string, one of the shepherds.

The parents watched as the all the Marys, and all the Josephs took their place on stage. Next came 20 angels, clothed in billowing gowns, and immense gauze wings. They took their place up front. The symmetry was stunning. This had all been carefully choreographed in practice, the director made a mark in chalk for each character. Drawing a circle for where each angel was to stand, and a cross for where each shepherds was to stand.

It had worked well for the children at practice, wearing street clothes. But now at the pageant itself, with everyone in the full dress, when the angels took the field, and, with their billowing costumes, covered up not only THEIR mark, but also the mark for all the adjoining shepherds.

And so it was, that as the 4 year old shepherds tried to take the field to watch their sheep by night, they tried to find their spot, and could not, that these four year old shepherds, being somewhat non-verbal, or perhaps driven by what a panicked demonic impulse, began treating the angels as angels have never been treated before.

Finally, one shepherd, (the son of a lawyer/preaching professor) had suffered about all the nonsense he could handle. He looked at the director in the wings, and angrily blurted out, "These damned angels are fouling up the whole show. They've hidden all the CROSSES."

Advent is our rehearsal time. We need to not hide the crosses. Nor the celebration.

In Advent Week 1, we saw Zechariah left in silence. In Advent Week 2, Mary, having gone through being perplexed, confused, fearful, came to acceptance. And an agreement to work with God. But if you watched the expression on Mary's face, you recognize, she came to acceptance, but there is no indication of joy.

She knows the challenges she faces, for herself, from others. A young woman, pregnant, not by her husband. What will people say? How will she be treated by family, friends, and the community? How will her baby be treated? Would her fiancé abandon her? She is pregnant by the Holy Spirit? Who is going to believe her? In her time and place, as it still is in many places in the world, those were life and death questions.

So far, that is where Mary's story has stopped. Mary has a sense of resigned acceptance: this is what I will do. But something is missing. Something crucial. It does not say a thing about joy.

Mary has heard from the angel. But she still faces the questions. And she is not likely to get much support from her hometown. So Mary remembers a cousin. This is an older cousin, Elizabeth.

Do you have one of those "go to" people in your life? Your "person?" An Aunt. An uncle. Older cousin. Friend of the family friend from school or your profession? Someone you trust for their support, their wisdom?

Mary goes to Elizabeth, not just as cousin, but as mentor. As trusted friend. Elizabeth is on social security, and is 6 month pregnant. A beautiful thing happens inside her when she hears Mary's voice. The baby moves in her womb.

My son turned 28 yesterday. He was my father's first grandchild. I remember when he was still in utero. Just a bun in the oven. He must have been about 6 months along, Dad came to visit. My wife said, "Do you want to feel the baby kick?" My father was a very formal sort of person, so he demurred, but she grabbed my dad's hand and held it firmly to her stomach until the baby kicked one through the goal posts.

The look of joy on my father's face was one I will never forget. To feel a baby kick, in yourself, or in someone else, is another worldly experience. For any of us.

At the sound of Mary arriving, Elizabeth feels more than the baby kick. For Elizabeth, It felt like her baby had just joined the Joffrey ballet. The baby leapt for joy.

What is it that makes a baby kick? Leap?

Biology might say, they are just stretching. Just trying to turn over and keep napping? That it is normal. Natural. No big deal. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing worth talking about.

Or maybe someone might say mom is not eating enough and the baby is hungry. Others might say: Mom drinking too much caffeine? Eating too much spicy food? Some judgmental comment, as some people are always ready to tell pregnant mothers how they are doing it wrong.

The thing is, I believe we can choose how we will see such things. I think it's up to us to choose our interpretation of life around us. So when Mary said hello, and Elizabeth's baby leapt, Elizabeth claimed it as an opportunity to show grace.

Elizabeth knew Mary's fear. She knew how many people had already judged her. So now, what others might look down on in disgrace, Elizabeth celebrates as a gift of God. Mary's dignity, that others surely tried to tear down in judgement, Elizabeth rebuilds with her words. Where others try to shatter Mary's ego with scandal, Elizabeth heals with her embrace. What others are embarrassed by, Elizabeth is thrilled by. Elizabeth CHOOSES an interpretation of this situation as a recognizable opportunity to proclaim this scandal as gift of God.

Her celebration is the crystalizing moment for Mary. Elizabeth is the catalyst for Mary's joy. When Elizabeth celebrates and affirms her, it is only then that Mary starts to sing:

"My soul magnifies the Lord.
My spirit rejoices in God my savior.
God has done great things for me.
Forever after, generations into the future will call me blessed."

Mary's joy only comes THROUGH ELIZABETH'S INTERPRETATION of the SITUATION. Elizabeth says: Look at this! Look at your situation! Do you see what this is? This is a gift of God!

What is amazing is that ELIZABETH's power of interpretation does not stop there. It seems to have a ripple effect. Soon after Mary leaves, singing as she travels down the road, Elizabeth's water breaks. It's time for her leaping baby to be born. Along with her husband, silent Zechariah.

Everyone says: You've got to name it Zechariah, Junior, after his father. Elizabeth says: No, his name is newness. His name is John.

Wait a minute... Maybe that way of talking about it is too comfortable for us in 2019. We miss the scandal. The challenge. Let me restate the story: Elizabeth says, "No, his name is not to be Zechariah. I want to name him Juan."

Elizabeth uses her words again to reinterpret the situation. Her whole family says, "You can't name him JUAN. That's not part of our family tree. That's not part of our people." None of her family will have it. They keep pressuring her, judging her, stifling her.

Silent Zechariah picks up a piece of chalk and writes, "His name is JUAN." A new name. New identity. New destiny. John finds his tongue, finds the power of speech, and finds the courage to speak up. He says: "Elizabeth is right. His name is Juan. Juan the Baptist." The power of Elizabeth to speak a new reality flows over the world again.

I ran across a haiku years ago. It has wonderfully haunted me ever since.

The Haiku goes:

Imagine a world
where your every move matters
welcome to that world

-- John Morse, NYC/DOT

In this situation, it is slightly amended:

Imagine a world
where your every word matters
welcome to that world.

There is an article in The Atlantic this month by Yoni Applebaum, on research by political scientists at Vanderbilt University looked at the social forces that have made America so tense. Postindustrial economy. Economic inequality. Hyperbolic language of public characters, which is amplified in the media. Change in racial and ethnic make-up of the nation. Change in the religious make-up of the nation.

It has created such tension in our society. The researchers found that both Republicans and Democrats are "distressingly willing to dehumanize members of the opposite party. "Partisans are willing to explicitly state that members of the opposing party are like animals, that they lack essential human traits."

Researchers go on to say, "this is a dangerous line to cross." "Dehumanization may loosen the moral restraints that would normally prevent us from harming another human being." The danger: may not be violence generally but it may radicalize some individuals or smaller groups to violent acts.

That is where Elizabeth comes in. She could have been so judgmental of Mary. She could have chosen to be harsh. To reject her. To call it a threat to the status quo to society. But she did not reject her. She celebrated her. That's good news for us. We too can choose how we will interpret the life of people around us. We can choose to be threatened by their scandal, the "otherness," and call it a threat, or we can celebrate it, and look for how God is giving us a new birth.

It is a matter, in the most profound sense, of being, like Mary and Elizabeth, special friends. We love to read and hear stories of special friendships. Kindred spirits.

Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn.

Mary, Dickon and Colin in The Secret Garden.

Ceile and Nettie in The Color Purple

Like Harry Potter and Hermione, and Ron Weasley.

Like George Bailey does for virtually everyone in It's a Wonderful Life.

Each friend reinterprets the situation of their other friend. Those are all wonderful and important. And there is part of a deep friendship in the story of Elizabeth does for Mary, with their Sisterhood of the Traveling Pregnancy Pants. Except this story takes friendship to a whole new level. In Elizabeth's words and actions, she recognizes and celebrates the unexpected gift of God in the "other." Her words of God's blessing thereby have the power to change the course of someone's life. To put things not just in a new perspective. To reinterpret this challenging situation into a God perspective.

To put things in the perspective that clearly shows God's blessing in the unexpected event. Even a scandal such as this, can be turned into a celebration. Elizabeth sets Mary free to sing in celebration.

So who are you going to make celebrate this year? Who are you going to proclaim as a gift of God? To look at their situation not as a scandal to judge, but a gift of God to celebrate? Who are you going to make sing with joy? Ask yourself that question.

Then remember, it may be someone you do not even know yet. But someone whom you will meet. Advent prepares us so that when Joseph and Mary come knocking at the door, we do not turn them away.

Instead, we will be ready to celebrate them as the gift of God that they are. Amen.

Sources:

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