

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Micah 5:2-5a
Luke 1:39-45

FULFILLMENT

When Nancy was in her first pregnancy, she took a yoga class for women who were expecting. Those who were in the class all had something in common, with bodies that were going through changes and minds that were wondering where their similar journeys would lead. The class offered not only a break from normal activities to pay attention to their bodies and to breathe deeply, but it also offered an opportunity for a sense of community to spring up between those in the class. This was helped by the yoga teacher who ended each class by sharing an account of a former class member's delivery.

Luke tells us of two pregnant women coming together, who find a bond in their time of expectancy. But to begin to understand what their time with each other might have meant, we need to review what this gospel account tells us had happened previously. The Lukan account begins in the temple, with a priest named Zechariah, who had traveled to Jerusalem to carry out priestly duties there. Twice a day, a priest was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary to burn incense, with the understanding that the prayers of the people would be carried in the smoke by an angel into God's presence. The altar of incense stood in front of the curtain that shielded the Holy of Holies, that place where it was understood that God was most present in the world.¹ It was a great honor that Zechariah was getting to lift the prayers of the people in this way. However, the angel that was expected to carry the prayers to God, first stopped and told the priest of some special events that God would be bringing about. It would involve the birth of a child to Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, someone who would help the people be prepared for the presence of the Lord, someone who would later be called John the Baptist. The couple had been unable to have children and they were now beyond expected child-bearing age, so Zechariah expressed his shock about what had been predicted. The angel, who identifies himself as Gabriel, told the priest that as a result of his doubt, he would be struck mute until the events unfolded as foretold. When Zechariah returned home to his town in the Judean hill country, sure enough, Elizabeth got pregnant.

Then we hear of the angel Gabriel visiting the Nazareth home of a young woman named Mary, to tell her of what would be another miraculous pregnancy. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph. Luke tells us they had not yet had sexual relations, so she was quite surprised when the angel told her that she would become pregnant and even more shocked that she was the one who would give birth to a child who would be the long-expected Messiah. Gabriel then told her that her relative Elizabeth, another unlikely candidate for pregnancy, was also expecting. Mary responds saying she was ready to be used by God.

So we've heard of two conversations - one between an angel and an older priest in a place of worship and the other between the same angel and a young woman in her home. Revelations about what God is doing can occur wherever God chooses. Both of the conversations were about an astounding pregnancy that God would bring about, using unlikely partners in order to provide leaders for God's people. That's what precedes our reading today, where there will be the first conversation between two people in the gospel account. This encounter takes place in another house, this time Zechariah's and Elizabeth's. She is six months pregnant when her relative, Mary, comes for a visit.

In her book, Misconception, Naomi Wolf describes the paradoxical nature of motherhood, particularly the impact on first-time mothers. She suggests that in pregnancy, "a woman is in the grip of one of the most primal, joyful, lonely, sensual, psychologically challenging, and physically painful experiences she can face. She's often overwhelmed by messages that infantilize who she's supposed to be and mystify what's happening to her."²

God doesn't leave Elizabeth and Mary on their own to face the challenges their service to God would entail. Mary was in a situation strange and confusing to her. In her home town, perhaps she would be surrounded by those who would respond to her pregnancy with accusation, gossiping, and condemnation. She needed someone who could understand what she was facing. She goes to visit her relative, Elizabeth, who was also pregnant for the first time. Elizabeth's situation was different, but perhaps she too would have faced ridicule with the comments about her being the age of a grandparent instead of a parent. Elizabeth and Mary become a bi-generational gift to one another. In each other's presence, they can recognize what truly is a blessing from God.

Obviously, many of us never get to experience what it is to have a baby forming within our bodies. But all of us have been impregnated with a purpose, with an opportunity to join with God's redemptive initiatives in our lives and in our world. The pursuit of that purpose will take us through stages of life similar to what women go through in a pregnancy, including moments of joy and anticipation. There are times when we don't fully understand what is going on. There will be moments when we are mystified about what such a journey will mean for our lives. Like women who are pregnant for the first time, we experience anticipation and joy along with conflicting feelings of inadequacy, frailty, and bewilderment. Our lives at certain times might actually feel foreign to us. Sometimes life gets so tough, frightening, or confusing that we feel like we've been overtaken by a mysterious visitation.

However, it is a great blessing that our lives never have to be left to ourselves alone. We can share what we understand and what is beyond our understanding with one another. In the supportive context of this congregation, we can share what we are going through as we ponder whether the presence of what God is doing is growing within us. When we have moments of inspiration, reassurances of grace, when we experience manifestations of the goodness of the Giver of life, we will find others who will welcome our telling of such experiences. And when we have times of doubt and confusion, when we need a place of safety when we have faced ridicule, we can find care and shelter with one another here as well.

Elizabeth and Mary found that even when God was doing something amazing within them, within their lives, it was greatly fulfilling to have accompaniment and understanding from someone else. As they experienced being part of something beyond them, as they encountered God's activity growing within them, they also were gifted with support along the way so that God's blessing to each of them could become a blessing to so many others beyond them. They experienced the fulfillment of God's plan in their lives and had the support needed to offer a chance for fulfillment to many others beyond their life stories.

This congregation is not a yoga class, but it is a place where we can breathe in the rich air of acceptance and encouragement and accompaniment. When you are feeling overwhelmed or confused, you can find here that you are among those with whom you can exhale your bewilderments and doubts and anxieties. Friends, you are a blessing to me and you have been and are called to be a blessing to one another as we share our encounters of the intersection of God's story coming into and working through our own stories in a place of love and support. By God's grace, the divine work within each of us can be a blessing to others here and beyond this place, gathering as an expectant people whom God has made pregnant with hope.

¹ http://www.agapebiblestudy.com/advent%20study/Advent%20Study_Part%20II.htm

² Naomi Wolf, Misconceptions: Truth, Lies, and the Unexpected on the Journey to Motherhood, Anchor Books, 2003.