

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, December 8, 2024

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Friends, we continue in the season of Advent this day. We continue also with a new sermon series we've entitled Holiday Gatherings. We believe, as Christ preached to his disciples, that whenever two or three are gathered in the name of God, God is there among them. We believe that in every one of our gatherings throughout this season, and really in all seasons, when two or three are gathered, Christ is there; and so we're reflecting on what that actually has looked like in scripture and what that might look like for us in our daily lives. We're going to read from the Gospel of Luke in a moment, but a word for us before we read of this text. Scott Ericson wrote a book a couple years ago called *Honest Advent*. He's one of my favorite artists. He's also a gifted author as well. He begins the Advent devotional by talking about the importance of vulnerability, the power of it actually; and Scott says this. He says, "Any real connection requires vulnerability, whether in marriage or in friendship or even with a stranger. A relationship can progress only so far along the normal platitudes of strength and accomplishment. It is only when we have exhausted our tales of trophy winning, when we let down our guard and speak the truths of our travels, that we find that where we really connect as humans is in the places we have found that we walk with a limp." Ericson, of course, alluding to Jacob and the wounding that happens and the limp that he walks away from his holy experience with. We meet, Ericson seems to tell us, in our places of vulnerability. It's an important word for us as we are about to read the story of two expectant mothers, two who are navigating all that comes along with pregnancy, two who, one who's navigating it in advanced age and one much younger, both bringing their own difficulty, their own trials. So we'll read of a vulnerable interaction between Elizabeth and Mary from the Gospel of Luke, the first chapter, verses 39 through 45; but before we read the text together, let us join our hearts in prayer.

Meet us here, oh gracious Spirit, Spirit of peace, Spirit of calm, Spirit of comfort, Spirit of challenge. Meet us here in your word. Meet us here that we might hear it afresh this day, your word for us and indeed for all of creation, and that in hearing it we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Beginning of the 39th verse of the first chapter of the Gospel according to Luke—

*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*

The grass withers in the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

Erikson seems to tell us that there is power in vulnerability. I think the text reveals to us that there is also power in shared experience. Shared experience. There is power in sharing our most

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trying experiences with another. There's power in sharing our most joyful experiences with another. In one case we are comforted in ways we couldn't imagine; in another our joy is multiplied in ways we could not imagine. I was leaving a counseling session a couple of Thursday mornings ago. I was really excited because my counselor and I had kind of put our finger on something in my history that I needed to pay attention to. We had spent about an hour kind of shaking the dust off of it, revealing it so I might see it a little bit more clearly. And when I was leaving that day, we had already talked about how we were going to spend the next couple of sessions together wrestling with it, peering at it, trying to understand it more deeply. This was a deeply personal experience and something that I was going to have to navigate in a really personal way, and so it was interesting to me that a buddy of mine who calls me many mornings during the week called me right after I got out of my counseling session; and he said after a few minutes of talking, he said, "I can hear something in your voice. Where are you coming from?" I said, "I just got done with a counseling appointment. Actually, I just saw my therapist, and we really put our finger on something that I'm going to have to pay attention to." And he said, "Would you share it with me?" And so I did in brief. He's one of my dearest friends. I shared in brief what was going on; and he said, "David, you're not going to believe this, but last week I went to my counselor, and we put our finger on something really, really similar; and so we committed—I don't know about you, what you and your counselor did, David—but we committed to spend the next couple of sessions wrestling with this thing, kind of trying to understand it better, right?" And I sat there driving down Poplar, which is not my place of peace, and what I felt in that moment was this rush. It wasn't a child in the womb, but it was, it was a...a warmth that kind of came upon me as I'm making that drive. It was, in that moment, having someone to share my experience with, not the same exact experience, right? I don't know his experience fully. He doesn't know mine, but we have this experience that is shared; and we're going to be navigating it in our different ways over the next couple of months together. There is power in shared experience. There's power in shared experience not only because we know we have companions on the journey, but also because having someone present with us on our journey means that we have someone who might be able to speak to us in a way that is encouraging when we need that encouragement. We might need someone to remind us that God is in the midst of that difficult and even joyful thing that is happening with us and in our lives, a person to speak a word of hope and promise and mercy to us. The Advent story according to the Gospel of Luke brings two women together and we see their mutual recognition of not only their shared experience but even more so what God is doing in each other's lives. There is something holy about a friendship or a relationship where the other person knows your experience and is with you in it and is also willing to speak a word of hopefulness when you need to hear that word. A pick-me millennial might say that we need to get us a friend like Elizabeth. That's what Mary probably would tell us as well. "Get you a friend like Elizabeth, one who will encourage you, speak to you words of hope." That's what Elizabeth is doing to her when she greets her, and the child in Elizabeth's belly leaps for joy. She exclaims, "Blessed are you among women." "Blessed," Mary must be thinking, "Well, that's what the angel said too, but I'm not quite sure I believe it. 'Blessed also is the fruit of your womb.'" And then we have the turn, "And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" And in a flash Mary has a brand new identity—the soon to be Mother of the Lord. Elizabeth is able to see something and claim it

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for her beloved friend, something that Mary needs to hear from another, you might imagine. Pregnancy is a joyful thing and also a really difficult thing, a thing that you navigate in community and with a partner or with family, right, most often. And yet, it can also be a really isolating thing to experience. And in that moment Elizabeth says, “Not only are you blessed, and not only is your child blessed, but indeed you have a new identity now. You are the Mother of the Lord.”

There is power in shared experience, but there's something holy about a friend who loves you and is for you. There's something powerful about being in relationship in community with people who also believe in the fulfillment of God's promises. Blessed are you who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to you by the Lord. That's what Elizabeth encourages Mary with as well. “You are blessed because you trust the promise that God is doing something in your life, growing something within you; and when you cannot believe and trust that, I will be here with you to encourage you, to remind you there is power in shared experience.”

There's also power in initiative. What we get to experience here with one very short line here at the very beginning of the text, what we get to experience is Mary's initiative. Here's what I mean. “In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country.” We don't get this story if a young pregnant woman doesn't pack up her stuff and make her way into the hill country of Judea. We don't get this story if Mary isn't willing to move from the place where she is to be in closer proximity to one who will love and encourage her. We don't get this story if Mary is unwilling to enter into the vulnerability of traveling alone, of treading the road or the path by herself for a time so that she can be in closer proximity, yea, right beside yea, embraced by her friend.

The Reverend Dr Abraham Smith—he's a professor at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. [Have y'all heard of Southern Methodist University? They played a football game last night. Are you wearing your tiger stuff? Me and Wendy had a little bet, okay. I love that “Go, Tigers.”] Here's what Reverend Dr Abraham Smith says about this. He says this situation—this experience that we get to read about in the first chapter of Luke—“This only happens because one of the women(Mary) went on a journey to see the other (Elizabeth.) Would we not be rescued from the narcissistic self-interest of our own mundane affairs if we were placed in the proximity of others? Would we not see the brimming humanity and divinity in all if we did not isolate ourselves? Who is willing to take Mary's spot today, to travel, to make the journey to see what God is doing in someone else's life?” And even in your own? Mary takes the initiative to close the distance between herself and one who will encourage her.

Sometimes we find it more difficult to do that, don't we, to close the distance with the one that feels distant from us—the parent or the child or the friend or the partner. But what we see in Mary's story here is that she is the one who takes the initiative to close the gap; and in so doing something beautiful and good and enduring happens. She finds there a companion for her journey. There is power in taking the initiative. I have a friend who has a pretty stressful job. The last few months have been even more stressful. They've lost a really important partner in their

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work. They've gone off to another place to work, and that means that my friend has been doing double duty for a couple of months now. Y'all know what that's like to be overwhelmed at work or in school. She took it upon herself to share in a healthy way with a coworker of hers the difficulty of what she was experiencing in the moment. She asked to have some time and coffee, and they sat down together. Weeks passed, and that same friend that she had confided in came to her early one morning with a cup of coffee from Starbucks and said, "I had a dream about you last night. I was you, and I could feel the weight of the burden that you are carrying right now. I woke up from the dream, and I prayed for you all night long that God would give you the energy to persevere." My friend reached out closing the distance with a friend, and that friend responded with compassion and encouragement, even a word of mercy.

In this season perhaps you feel like Mary, something growing within you that is scary and also beautiful, something that will certainly bring joy but also brings peril to your existence. Perhaps you are in need of someone who can simply see the weight of the burden that you are carrying. If that is you, I might encourage you to close the distance with a neighbor, maybe someone in your pew, maybe someone in your favorites on your iPhone, maybe someone with whom you haven't even delved deeply into relationship with yet. The God that we know in Jesus Christ promises to be present in those interactions. And, so, if you are Mary and you are feeling that, my hope and my prayer is that there might be one who can walk alongside you right now with a word of encouragement. Blessed are you, even how difficult the journey is going to be. Blessed are you who are bringing that beautiful new thing into your life and into the world, or maybe you're Elizabeth. Maybe over the next few weeks there will be one who will come to you, maybe at work, maybe at home, maybe on a Sunday morning around cookies and juice and coffee after worship, and they will need a word from you that will sustain them through a really difficult time. Or they will need someone to join them in the joy of what they are navigating. They've been afraid to tell someone this exciting news, and they need you to hear it and encourage them with it. If you are Elizabeth, may you trust and believe that the spirit of God is present within you to give you a word of consolation, of comfort, and of encouragement. Wherever you find yourself on this second Sunday of Advent, may you in this story from the Gospel of Luke know that the spirit of God is present within you, within people in the pew right beside you and in front of you and behind you. May you know that that same Spirit which helped the child leap in Elizabeth's belly is indeed here to encourage and sustain you in this season.

Let's pray together.

Meet us in our joy this morning, oh God. Meet us in our difficulty. By your grace give us a word that might sustain us, even encourage us, even bless us. By your grace give us words to speak that might encourage and sustain and bless our neighbors. Let us be reminded in every gathering that you are present. Let us trust in your mercy to be present amongst us and within us and around us. For we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ and in honor of the matriarchs of our faith. Amen.

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