

Last week on the first Sunday of Advent we started at the very beginning of Luke's Gospel where Zechariah, an older priest, is visited by the angel Gabriel and told the news that he and his older and barren wife, Elizabeth, are to have a son and name him John. Zechariah questions how this would happen seeing as he and Elizabeth are up there in age, and she has been unable to have children, and because Zechariah doubts, Gabriel makes him mute until after John's birth. We're told then that Elizabeth became pregnant and kept to herself for five months. A month or so later, the angel Gabriel makes a visit to Mary, a young peasant girl, who is from Nazareth. Though she is engaged to a man named Joseph, we are told that Mary is a virgin. The song Darby just sang encompasses an older, more experienced Mary. Because we know the bigger story, we forget how young Mary was at this time. She was around 13 or 14 years old when Gabriel drops some crazy news telling her that she is going to have a son and will name him Jesus. Well, not just any son...but God's Son...the "Son of the Most High" (v. 32). Gabriel didn't make this announcement to Herod's daughter or to a member of elite Jewish society or even to a priest; he made it to a poor, small town Jewish girl. This Advent story "reminds us that God moves in and among those whom society most often leaves behind, that the thread of redemption woven throughout Scripture winds its way through a lot of small towns and seemingly little lives" (*The Characters of Christmas*, Daniel Darling). Back to the story- Mary wants to know how this will happen seeing as she is a virgin. Gabriel tells her how she will conceive through the power of the Holy Spirit and that her relative Elizabeth is also pregnant with a son. Here Gabriel offers Mary a

sign...an incredible promise. Gabriel tells Mary that “nothing is impossible for God” (v. 37). After this news, the faithful and courageous Mary says yes to God. Today’s Gospel story takes place right after Gabriel leaves Mary. Before turning to scripture, let us pray. **PRAY.** Listen to a word from God. **READ. Luke 1:39-45.**

The angel Gabriel leaves, and Mary makes a b-line to her cousin Elizabeth’s house. Now Elizabeth’s house wasn’t a few doors down or across town. It was in the hill country about 80 miles outside of Nazareth. How did Mary get there? Did she walk, run or ride a camel? We aren’t told many details- just that she hurries there. I wonder if the reason Mary went to visit Elizabeth was to confirm the angel Gabriel’s news?! Yet, she seemed to believe Gabriel and said yes to God? Maybe it was her natural response that led her to Elizabeth’s- you know the one- when you’re afraid, you phone or go see a friend who will listen and make it all feel a little less lonely and overwhelming? Or maybe Mary wasn’t ready to tell Joseph and needed to not feel so weird or pushed for an explanation? I mean it seems like a great excuse to go and take care of your pregnant cousin, right?! Again we don’t really know why Mary went, we just know that God gave Mary & Elizabeth to each other. You know when God sends a person just when you need it?! Here Luke shines the spotlight on two, lowly and shamed women through whom God has chosen to begin the transformation of the world (Judith Jones, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). Can’t you just see their embrace upon their tender reunion? That embrace and greeting are what many artists over the centuries have imagined as well. Upon Mary entering

the house and greeting Elizabeth, Mary receives a surprising reaction from the unborn John the Baptist in Elizabeth's womb! At the mere sound of Mary's voice, John leaps for joy. Even though John is yet to be born, he is already preparing the way for the Lord. One scholar put it this way- "The one is old and her son will close an age; the other is young and her son will usher in the new" (Interpretation Series). John will serve Jesus. Even in prenatal activity, God's sovereign will is evident.

Many of us get captured by the activity taking place within Elizabeth's womb but notice that something also happens to Elizabeth in this moment of their greeting. We're told that she was filled with the Holy Spirit. With her outside voice she blurts out a blessing for Mary. She knows that Mary is carrying her Lord! She also knows that Mary believed that God would fulfill the promises God made to her (vv. 43, 45). Last week I shared that many scholars believe John the Baptist to be the first prophet after 400 years of God's silence. However, I would argue, with many others, that Elizabeth is the first prophet, as she, filled with the Holy Spirit, gives the first sermon about Jesus. We also could say that Luke is describing here the first Christian worship service in history (Debie Thomas, [www.journeywithjesus.net](http://www.journeywithjesus.net)). As theologian Henri Nouwen describes it, "God's most radical intervention in history was listened to and received in community." What a gorgeous and challenging example for us to life up to (Thomas). Elizabeth is also the first human to come into contact with Mary after Gabriel's visit. She is the first one to hear what Mary has to say, maybe because she's the first

one willing to listen? They exchange vulnerability. I'm sure Elizabeth is glad to have the company, as Zechariah hasn't been talking at all these days. She's been keeping to herself, we're told...until now. I wonder when it was that Mary's fiancé, Joseph, found out Mary's news? Most of the time when we think of who should know this wonderful, world-changing news- we think of important and powerful people being in the know. But here- Luke has two, ostracized women to be each other's support and community while together trusting in God's redemptive plan for the world. Isn't it crazy both the way and who God chooses to communicate God's love? Think about a time when you've received news that was difficult to take in. With whom did you share your fears, doubts, faith, joy, etc.?

For confidentiality purposes, I'll call her Suzanne. Suzanne was a junior in college- 20 years old- and she was pregnant. Suzanne wasn't married. She wasn't engaged. She wasn't even serious about this guy. He was a one-night stand. Suzanne was panicking- full on anxiety attack. What would she do? Her parents were going to kill her! Her church wouldn't accept her! We sat quietly in her dorm room as the tears ran down her face, her shame and embarrassment were most apparent. She felt alone, afraid and ashamed. Obviously, Mary's situation is a little different; however, we must remember that a young girl in Mary's day and situation could be stoned for being pregnant. Luke doesn't give us any of the details of what Mary was feeling, but we can imagine. Can't you imagine some of her questions? "Is Joseph going to stick around? Will my parents still love me? Who am I to raise a child- this child- the son of

God” (Thomas)? No, I imagine this “good news” wasn’t at first easy news to believe nor to share nor to live with. Sure in retrospect- knowing the story- we can all gloss over it- no big deal- but this was a big deal...a very big deal!

Elizabeth connects the dots in Mary’s story, with the help of the Holy Spirit. “She makes the connection between trust and blessing. Mary’s ‘favored’ status has nothing to do with wealth, health, comfort, and ease. Her blessing lies solely in her willingness to trust God and to surrender to God’s will. I wonder how desperately Mary needs this blessing by the time she lands at Elizabeth’s doorstep, exhausted and scared. My guess is, Mary carries Elizabeth’s blessing in her heart the rest of her life.

Afterall, her vocation as Jesus’ mother is not easy” (Thomas). Yesterday we held a Memorial service for Mary Masse here in the sanctuary.

During the service a younger woman, Phyllis, who had taught with Mary, got up to speak. She spoke tenderly about their relationship and how Mary had helped her when she was estranged from her own mom. What she didn’t say is that she had moved in with Mary and Paul for a while when things got really hard for her. Mary and Paul provided a sanctuary- a safe place- for this young woman, and I could hear in her story how this safe place that God provided through Mary and Paul greatly healed and shaped her. Mary Masse and I would argue also Paul were this young woman’s Elizabeth.

Who encourages and prayerfully supports you? Who blesses you and reminds you of God’s favor- that God is with you, even if you don’t

experience it to be true? Elizabeth praises Mary for not only being the mother of her Lord but for having the faith to believe God's word. What would it look like to recover Elizabeth's vocation of blessing? To cultivate spiritual attentiveness? To look for and to remind one another of glimpses of God? What would it look like to hold sanctuary- a safe space- for others and ourselves- for our shame, our fear, our pain and grief and our good news, too? You know- incarnational relationships- relationships where God dwells- and remind us that God is always with us and hasn't given up on us. Where are these sanctuaries- these people- these places of grace in our lives where God puts a comma where everyone else puts a period?

I was given a glimpse of the kingdom of God this week as I witnessed many Elizabeth and Mary relationships in the death of Pete Kerns. That's right Elizabeth and Mary relationships involve men as well. I've gotten phone calls, emails, and texts from many of you who are heartbroken at the news of Pete's death. People told me stories of their relationship with Pete and how he blessed them and showed them God's love. And in the same breath, they all said, "he had his vices, too, but he was a gentle giant." Fred Woods, the artist who painted this picture, was one of the Elizabeths for Pete, as he was Pete's emergency contact at the hospital among many other things. I'm sure Mary also enriched Elizabeth's life, too! Though many of us aren't blood related, we're related through Christ. We're sisters and brothers in the family of God. God sends us Elizabeths in our time of need. What sanctuary Pete provided for many of you and what sanctuary, I imagine, many of you

provided for him. God hasn't given up on us because God sends Elizabeths to us. Maybe we should rename Triune the House of Elizabeth?! Afterall, God moves in and among those whom society most often leaves behind. Mary and Elizabeth are proof! We're all God's children, and we all are welcome in this place! "May we, like Elizabeth and Mary, trust that God is coming to save and free us in Christ Jesus, our Lord. May we, like them, continue to be a community that shares and receives the gifts of community, blessing, and peace as we hope and wait" (Jones). Christ is coming! The Prince of Peace is on the way! Hallelujah and Amen!