

Elizabeth, Mary, and the Incarnation
Fourth Sunday in Advent; Dec. 22, 2024
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Luke 1:39-45: 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."

Introduction. Our lesson for this morning from the gospel of Luke is an unusual story in the Bible because everyone who speaks in it is a woman. We don't have male priests and apostles interrupting the dialog or dismissing what these women have to say.

This passage reminds me of a story in the book of Exodus when Pharaoh ordered the destruction of every male baby born to the Israelites, and two midwives bravely defied Pharaoh's order. They secretly saved baby Moses and other babies. I don't think it is coincidence that at two of the greatest turning points in the Bible, everything depended on the decisions of women. Thanks to those midwives, Moses was able to be the liberator of enslaved Israelites and the giver of the law. In our lesson today we see also two women who played key roles in redemption.

Elizabeth and Mary are so important in the Christian tradition that for centuries these have been two of the most popular names in Christian countries, with dozens of variations in spelling and pronunciation. Although we Moravians do not exalt Mary as much as Catholics do, we do honor her as the mother of our Savior.

Women

Our lesson today begins with a young woman who was betrothed to a man named Joseph. Luke doesn't tell us much about Mary's life. We don't even know if her parents were still alive. All we know is that she was betrothed. Unlike Matthew, Luke doesn't even tell us much about Joseph or his reactions to Mary's surprise pregnancy. Luke keeps the focus on Mary who is the most important figure.

Luke says that Mary was visited by the archangel Gabriel. Only a few women talked to angels in the Bible. One of them was a young mother named Hagar whom God protected in the wilderness. Gabriel tells Mary that she has been chosen by God to be the mother of the Messiah, the Son of God. Even though she was young and poor, she has been chosen. Interpreters disagree over whether Mary had a choice in this matter, but I think she did.

She made the decision to be an agent of redemption. She said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord,” just like the prophet Isaiah had done centuries earlier. Mary followed Gabriel’s instructions even though she was risking her upcoming marriage, her status in the community, and even her life. Joseph could have ended the betrothal when Mary became pregnant or handed her over to the community for punishment. Mary did not know what would happen. She might have to go through her pregnancy this alone. But she still agreed. Mary took a leap of faith and trusted the divine messenger. We don’t hear about Joseph again until chapter 2 when he takes Mary to Bethlehem.

Luke’s story is tantalizingly short, and in the first five centuries of the Christian church, people made up a variety of new stories to fill in the gaps. Some of these stories appear in the apocryphal Gospel of James. The Gospel of James is a bit like “fan fiction” on the internet where fans of books and movies create their own stories to expand the canon. In the Catholic and Orthodox churches, some of those additional stories about Mary and her family, such as her mother being named Anne and that her own birth was miraculous, became part of the tradition, but Protestants rejected all the stories not in the New Testament gospels. All we have is the tantalizing and brief account given by Luke, but it tells us a lot about faith, love, and hope.

Mary

People often make assumptions about Mary’s age. We really don’t know how old she was, but since had never been married, we assume she was young. We also don’t know how old Joseph was. None of that was really important to Luke who jumps right into the narrative by telling us that Mary had a vision of an angel. The angel told her that she had been chosen by give birth to the Messiah. She would become pregnant even though she was had never been with a man, which Mary,

naturally, found hard to accept. She questioned the angel, but the only sign that the angel's words were true was that she got pregnant.

The church has often found it hard to talk about Mary's condition because we don't like mentioning things like virginity and pregnancy in church. Children sometimes ask embarrassing questions this time of year, especially about Mary not being married. Some of you may remember the days when you couldn't show a woman pregnant in movies or television. It was considered unseemly. In Christian art, there are many beautiful paintings of the Annunciation when the angel appeared to Mary, but relatively few showing her in the last months of pregnancy.

Several years ago, a mural artist in North Carolina painted murals in two Episcopal churches in the mountains near West Jefferson. You may have seen the big mural of the Last Supper in Glendale Springs. In another church he did a small mural of Mary when she was "great with child," and people were offended because she was visibly pregnant. We like to sing Christmas carols about the birth of the Savior, but we want to ignore the nine months leading up to that or the nine months after. We have lots of religious art with Mary kneeling at the manger, but almost none showing her struggling with morning sickness and other aspects of being pregnant. Luke is the only NT writer to even come close to talking about that.

Visiting Elizabeth

Luke tells us that Mary had a profoundly life-changing religious experience, and that the angel told her that her kinswoman Elizabeth was also pregnant with a special child. It is sometimes said that Elizabeth and Mary were cousins, but the Greek word used in this passage includes more than first cousins. Let's just say that Mary and Elizabeth were cousins in the North Carolina definition of cousins. When Julie and I first joined Home Church thirty years ago she was surprised that so many people in the Moravian Church said they were my cousin, including fourth cousins twice removed. Now she's an expert in family trees and distant relations.

The key thing in this story, though, is not how closely related Mary and Elizabeth were, but that Mary went to see Elizabeth soon after she realized that she was going to have a baby. It was a long journey from Nazareth in Galilee to the Judean hill country where Elizabeth lived. Luke doesn't describe the journey, but it's

interesting that there is no mention of Joseph or her father or anyone else taking her to see Elizabeth. It looks like she was brave enough to travel alone.

Clearly, she was eager to talk to someone who would understand, who would not judge her, reject her, or call her crazy. You may know that our daughter Sarah had a baby this summer. When she found out she was expecting, she also quickly sought out family members and friends to help her deal with the challenges posed by pregnancy. She was eager to know if we were happy or upset by her news. We were very happy. The point is that Mary was no different from any woman who unexpectedly finds herself on the path to motherhood. She looked for support from another woman. Someone who would understand and help her.

Elizabeth was happy to see Mary and hear her news. She was beyond happy. She was literally ecstatic since she was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied about Mary and her baby. For many centuries, virtually all Christian churches ignored the fact that Elizabeth was a prophet. A woman, an elderly woman, was a prophet. We focus so much on prophets like John the Baptist, Malachi, and Isaiah during the Advent season we generally ignore that a woman spoke the word of God. In other words, Elizabeth was a preacher who proclaimed the Word of God: Mary was blessed, and her child would be blessing to many. It was a welcome prediction that Mary believed.

Leaping for joy

And then we come to a strange and interesting part of this story. More strange than angels, you ask? More interesting than a woman prophet? More strange and interesting than a virgin conceiving? Maybe not, but it is strange and interesting none the less. Elizabeth told Mary that the baby leaped for joy when Mary spoke.

It is quite likely that this was the first time Elizabeth had felt the baby kick. People used to call the first kicks “the quickening” because that was the first sign of life that a mother could feel. Some of you know how exciting this first kick is. It’s especially exciting when someone else can feel the kicks, too. Sometimes the kicking is a bit rough and painful, but it is still exciting. Elizabeth somehow knew that John was kicking for joy, perhaps because she was joyous herself.

Zinzendorf

Count Zinzendorf, the great Moravian theologian, loved this story in Luke, and he often preached on it. He even included it in several liturgies. Zinzendorf was convinced that churches were wrong to define faith in terms of belief or doctrine or even the Bible. Faith, for Zinzendorf, is not intellectual; it is experiential. Faith is the experience of being in the presence of Christ. Faith is relationship, not dogma.

Faith is something you experience. Zinzendorf thought that too many theologians treated faith like reading a piece of music rather listening to the music and letting it flow through you. We know that babies respond to music, especially music sung by their mothers. Why should we be surprised that babies respond to the music sung by God that we can hear only with our hearts?

For Zinzendorf the best evidence that someone has faith is that they are joyful. He called this blessed happiness. You don't have to understand the doctrine of the Trinity or the doctrine of the Atonement to have faith, you simply need to have Jesus, to love Jesus, to follow Jesus. As our lessons today say, faith is not about being religious; it is about walking humbly with God. Zinzendorf claimed that John the Baptist had faith before he could see or talk or even think. In the darkness and safety of the womb, John recognized Jesus and leapt for joy. Should I not for gladness leap, led by Jesus as his sheep?

Children in the Moravian church

One reason Zinzendorf practiced infant baptism because he believed that infants can have faith before they can recite a creed. They are enveloped in the love of God who made them and redeemed them, and they can experience the warmth of Christ's spirit. Back in Zinzendorf's day, Moravian congregations sometimes held worship services just for expectant mothers and other worship services just for nursing mothers and their babies.

The modern Moravian Church still recognizes and values the spirituality of children. If you look closely at the stained-glass windows here at Home Church, notice how many include children and women. Our Christmas Eve candlelight service, which is precious to us even as we grow old, was originally a service just for the children. Our Moravian star tradition began with school children. Wherever the Moravians built churches, they built schools for children, and welcomed children in worship.

Incarnation

This leads us to the most important part of our Christmas celebrations. We used to call Christmas the Feast of the Incarnation. Incarnation is a fancy word for becoming flesh. When we sing “Hail the Incarnate Deity” in our Christmas carols, we are singing about the mind-boggling notion that in some mysterious, magical, inexplicable way God the Son became a human being. The Gospel of John says that the Word became flesh and dwelled among us. Luke’s gospel is more visceral. Luke emphasizes that the God the Son became a human being in the womb of an incredibly brave young woman. Salvation began nine months before Christmas.

Some of our Christmas songs tell us about the Incarnation because they imply that the baby in the manger never cried. In paintings of nativity scenes or putzes, Mary rarely looks like she went through labor. We never see pictures of sleep-deprived Joseph caring for his son. But the baby that the angel foretold was a real life baby, not an angelic doll. Jesus was born the way most babies are - with sweat and blood and many tears. Mary needed to feed him and clean him and soothe his fears, just as mothers have done since the dawn of humanity.

There was another great theologian named Martin Luther. He was a monk until he rebelled against the Catholic Church and started a Reformation. He was still a bachelor into his 30s, but he was finally persuaded to marry a former nun named Katherina von Bora. They had several children together. One of his hymns, which we are singing today tells the story of the Son of God coming from heaven to live with us on earth. Each verse was written for one of his children to sing.

Conclusion

The thought I want to leave you with today comes from Luther. He once told his students that he had never really understood the meaning of the Incarnation until he had a wife and children. He insisted that no one should dare preach about Christmas and the Incarnation until they have changed diapers because Mary and Joseph had to do that for Jesus. The great mystery, the great joy of Christmas is that God came down to earth – not as angel, but as a child. Redemption came to humanity through a vulnerable, crying child. Praise be to God!