

12-19-21
Advent 4
Luke 1:39-55

Two Babies

Having a baby anytime of the year is a big deal, but having a baby at Christmas is a special blessing. We rejoice with Kennon and Heidi, who don't live among us anymore, but will always belong here in some sense, in the birth of their daughter this week. I'm sure their house is a different place this morning than it was a few days ago.

We haven't celebrated a birth in a while. Some of you will remember our joy and our excitement in March of 2020 when we gathered here with John Paul and Elise and Grandma Maxine to baptize Jack. The very next Sunday, Covid changed our lives in ways we're still sifting through. By now Jack is half grown and has everybody including Grandma Maxine right where he wants them. There is something about celebrating new life and hope with a baby that stirs hope in even the most cynical among us.

It's been a long time since we had a baby in our house. At 43 and 37, our boys left those years behind years ago. We, of course, still remember details of their birth that they get tired of hearing. Way back in the 70's, we and another couple who were friends then and have journeyed with us ever since were the last couple in our circle of friends at church and school to have kids. Deanna and Becky went to what was the young women's circle at church and almost gave up on it because they were the only ones there who didn't have kids and you know how those conversations go. The conversation always seemed to be more about kids and the process of having and then rearing them than it was about Bible study or faith formation or whatever that group was formed to do. We wound up having Blake before our friends had their Jesse, but those two moms guided each other through

that process as they went through it together. The birth of both our sons were problematic--pre-eclampsia and related issues. Both wound up being C-section deliveries. Our friends were at the hospital with us shortly after Blake arrived, and we still laugh when we remember that when Deanna woke up and saw Becky there by her bed, she said, "Don't do this, Becky. Don't do this!" But Becky did, and we did again a few years later.

No one knows for certain why Mary traveled to be with her older cousin, Elizabeth when they were both bearing children. Elizabeth and Zechariah were much older, and had probably resigned themselves to being childless. But like Abraham and Sarah and Hannah and others before them, God surprised them with the conception of a child late in life. It's almost Christmas, so you know Mary's story. Betrothed to Joseph, preparing to be married, and then the angel Gabriel shows up unannounced one day with the strangest announcement she and her family had ever heard.

There are several signs that Mary and her family were faithful. The fact that the Angel came to her is probably the clearest of these signs. Surely God would not choose someone who didn't know the promises and hope God's people had held to for generations. Even in a small, insignificant place like Nazareth, people like Mary and her family had waited for generations for the One God had promised and for the hope and assurance he would bring. Zechariah, the husband of Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, was a priest in the Temple, so there were family ties connecting Mary and her family to the hope that God's promise would come to fulfillment.

We almost always depict Mary as a model of faithfulness. Even Protestants like us can be inspired by this young woman who found herself chosen and submitted to the role before she could possibly have understood what it meant. We never hear Mary speak very many words, but these words we hear from her today say plenty.

So this trip to visit her cousin could have happened for any number of reasons. Mary's news about a baby was not joyfully

received by all. Joseph considered what would have been his right, to disentangle himself from his commitment to her and go find someone else, but he, too received word from an angel that this Child was not an embarrassment or a source of shame. Nazareth was a small town, and it didn't take long for word to get around that everything might not be exactly as it appeared in Mary's household. Imagine being Mary and her mother and going to the well and doing the other things they did with other women in their village. Sooner or later, you know the conversation turned to Mary's obvious signs of pregnancy. Those conversations had to be difficult and confusing.

Some of you may have seen the work of a guy named Cuyler Black. He is a Canadian and a pastor and an artist and lots of other things. He drew cartoons that became greeting cards. I think you can still get some of them online. We sent them to everybody we knew for a few years. He drew cards for all kinds of occasions, and they all connected to his faith in some humorous way. One of my favorite cards that I probably still have somewhere in a drawer has Mary riding a camel with Joseph walking alongside her and other people traveling with them, maybe going to the Temple for some worship celebration. The camels they're all riding have early forms of what we'd call bumper stickers placed appropriately. One family is proud to announce that their son is in medical school. Another one boasts that their son is an honor student somewhere else. Mary and Joseph's bumper sticker says, "Our son is God!" Imagine having that conversation, making that assertion at the well with your neighbors. A few of those encounters, and Mary's folks may have decided it was time to send her away for a while. Some of us remember different times when unwed mothers went to visit their aunt in the country. Maybe that was why Mary went to the hill country to visit Elizabeth—to get away from the talk. You know how people can be. Even though Mary's neighbors and her mother's friends were faithfully waiting, as they were, for the coming of God's Promised One, none of them believed he would come to their town, and certainly not the way this story of Mary's

was unfolding. Elizabeth knew something about those conversations at the well. She had endured a lifetime of scorn and rejection because she couldn't have a child. So these two women had things to share with one another that many others would never understand.

And we must also consider the possibility that Mary needed some help to assume this role that had been thrust upon her. Faithful, obedient Mary is the way we usually conceive her, and as close as we are to the Catholic Church up the street, I'm not about to suggest that Mary was anything but faithful and obedient, but if this story really happened as we believe it did, even the most faithful among us would need a little help to grasp what was happening. Elizabeth was not only pregnant at the same time Mary was, she had long before given up hope of ever being that way. She, too, descended from faithful generations who instilled in her love and devotion to God, must have had days when she wondered why she did not know the fullness of God's love as other women did when they became mothers. Was there something defective in her witness? Was there something deficient in her faith? On one level she knew better. But you know how that goes. We all troop in here every week so that I can tell you that whatever you have done or whatever you have left undone God still loves you and will forgive you and empower you to begin again. We hear those words, and I relish in being the one to speak them to you more than fifty times a year. We believe them. We depend on them. But we all have our days when we wonder if they can possibly be true. Surely we have tried God's patience too much. Surely there will come a time when God will say he's had enough and give up on us. Some days we think he may already have.

We have each other to help us on those days. We have this place and these traditions. We have God's Word, and we have the privilege of prayer and reflection. But we all have those days.

I believe and am grateful that God brought Mary and Elizabeth together at a point of need for both of them. Zechariah

had demonstrated that he wasn't sure about where he and Elizabeth found themselves. He couldn't speak at all for a while. So he was not much help to Elizabeth. No telling what Mary endured, even from those who loved her. Who had ever heard such an outlandish tale? If her faith did waver, where could she turn for help? So whatever her motivation might have been, Mary knew she did not have everything she needed within her to do what lay ahead of her. Elizabeth wasn't sure she did either. So God brought them together.

And the faithful of all the ages benefit from their conversation and time together as much as they did. The Angel Gabriel reminded Mary that Elizabeth was a sure sign that nothing is impossible with God. We all need that assurance once in a while.

Then there is that strange, prebirth encounter between John and Jesus. I know babies moved around in the womb, and I know we men can't comprehend such a thing, but Scripture is clear that Elizabeth was three months further along than Mary, and that John moved so that Elizabeth knew it. I know there are all kinds of reasons why that might happen, again most of which I know I know nothing about, but Luke would have us understand that those kids were connected before they knew each other. We've spent two weeks talking about the adult encounter between these two cousins. But John's ministry of preparation began even before they were born when he couldn't wait to get out of his mother's womb and to begin to tell people about this important cousin of his!

The words that Mary speaks in response to all these things are as prophetic as any of the words Isaiah or the other eighth century prophets ever said. Whatever transpired between these two women in the midst of awesome and wonderful and scary and unsettling things gave Mary the confidence she needed not only to move ahead with what God was calling her to do, but to affirm and let other know that God was about something important here. When Mary says that all generations will call her blessed, that was never a statement about her; it was about the

joy she experienced as the means God chose to bring hope, love, joy, and peace to the world.

That same God that stirred all that up for Mary and Elizabeth continues to stir around in your life and in mine. By now, all of you know that Deanna and I are about to set out on a new phase of life, one with lots of unanswered questions. That part of our journey sets you on a journey you didn't expect to be on in these days either. And your journey, too, brings lots of unanswered questions. But God is somehow stirring among us in all those things and in ways we haven't figured out yet. But we do not face those stirrings alone. God will surround us with people who will help us figure out all the steps along the way. We know no one except our kids and some old Scottsboro connections in Northeast Alabama these days. The folks there don't know us. But God is stirring among us to create a relationship in which we can find ways to do ministry. Your Session met Joan Gandy, the pastor of First Presbyterian in Natchez last Sunday. She will become their Moderator in a few days, and will guide them and you through a process that will result in opportunities to do ministry in ways you have not done before. Not only is God in all this, but God will surround all of us with people who will walk those roads with us and assure us that there is still nothing that is impossible with God and that God is still alive and active, saying and doing things in the world. These three kids who have stood before us and professed their faith, faith they learned to practice here and from us, are the surest sign today that this ministry is important and that it should continue. Didn't something move a little in you when they were up here? I thought so. Me, too. If we will be alert and responsive to all those things God is saying and doing, there is no end to what God can do with and for us. And our souls will magnify the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Almighty and everlasting God, we pray in this season for you to come. We know what it is to wait for someone to come. We know things will be different. Some of us are waiting for some who will come to share the holidays. Routines will change. We'll make all the allowances we make when someone visits. Some have welcomed kids home who have been away at school. We wonder if they'll be the same kids who left us a few weeks ago. We know they're not. Sometimes those kids bring people with them, people they say are important to them, so we try to make them important to us, too. So we know something about waiting. We know that waiting for you to come, Lord, is different than any of that. We know that you are coming to make peace, whether we're ready for it or not. You want us to be at peace with ourselves so that we can find ways to be at peace with each other and with those with whom we've grown comfortable disagreeing. You want to make peace within families and among nations. We're not sure we're ready for the change all this will require of us. But your coming to us is different than holiday guests who will eventually go home or kids who will go back to school and take their new attitudes with them. You plan to stay among us, and you have expectations of us. You want good will and justice from us whether we are ready to give them or not. You want us to break down barriers, and some of us have worked pretty hard to set them up. You want us to understand one another and that means listening and hearing things we're not sure we want to hear. You want us to live together in peace, and we're pretty sure we're not ready. Help us to get ready, Lord, for the things you want for us are much better than the things we want for ourselves. Bring us hope that we can be who you call us to be and do what you want us to do.

When you come, we believe you will bring comfort to all who are in pain, to all who know the rawness of grief, and for all who need healing and restoration. That's all of us in one way or another, and admitting that is an important first step in welcoming you

among us. May all who suffer find confidence in your extravagant and matchless grace and comfort in the hope that there really is nothing that can separate us from your love, even our stubborn refusal to receive it on your terms. When you come, you will bring compassion and strength to all who are weak and weary, to those who stumble through day after day unable to recognize the beauty around them and the meaning life can have. Help all who struggle to find hope in you, whatever the source of their struggle, self-imposed or thrust upon them. Help us all to turn to you and to find hope. Come, to us, Lord Jesus. Fill the world with your grace and your peace. Begin that process even now as we reach for that peace as we pray as Jesus taught us to pray when he said: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.