

Sermon December 22, 2024

Luke 1:39-55

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."

And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of the servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name.

God's mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation. God has shown strength with God's arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly, and has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. God has helped the servant Israel, in remembrance of God's mercy, according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to God's descendants forever."

What Mary Knew

In a few moments we will sing the beautiful song "Mary, Did You Know?" It's a wonderful song that weaves together who Jesus grows to be with the

infant baby that Mary prepares for today. The song writer asks "Mary did you know?" but today's scripture reminds us that Mary did know what God had called her to do and what her unborn child would be capable of. Mary knew because the angel Gabriel told her and we are told that Mary took his words and pondered them in her heart. God prepared her for the awesome work that awaited her and chose her because she was the perfect woman to bring God's son to the world. Mary knew... and trusted in God, even when the journey seemed so difficult. She put her trust in God when her neighbors looked at her in shock and disgust. She put her trust in God when Joseph struggled with his own feelings of betrayal and misunderstanding. She put her trust in God as she travels miles away to visit her cousin Elizabeth... waiting and hoping for the scandal and gossip to blow over.

And Elizabeth greets her with love and welcome. Elizabeth is also expecting a special child. After years of desperately waiting for a child, her prayers have been answered. She and Mary will bear the two who will play key roles in ushering in God's holy realm. John the Baptist and Jesus. Both sent by God.

When Elizabeth sees Mary, her unborn baby recognizes the blessing that Mary carries and he leaps for joy in her womb. Can you imagine Elizabeth's surprise as her baby does a dance of joy within her?

Two women who God chose to give birth to new life. One, who had given up all hope of being a mother, another who was little more than a child herself. Yet God entrusted the Kingdom to these women

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb," Elizabeth cries out. In Mary, she recognizes the first disciple. In Elizabeth, Mary finds one who believes her and supports her. All she can do is open her mouth and praise God. She moves out of fear and confusion and embraces hope and joy.

Mary was the first to hear God's call; Mary was the first to be willing to set aside her own hopes and dreams for Jesus. Mary was the first disciple!

Yes, Mary knew... from the very beginning!

But of course, this isn't the end of the story. As the years go by, and the responsibilities of motherhood take precedence, the wonder of angels and dancing babies began to fade. After Jesus grows up and hits the road to preach and teach, scripture tells us that several times Mary and her other children tried to stop him. As he faced new risks in his opposition of the political and religious leaders, Mary was surely terrified for his safety. The gospels tell of times when Mary and his brothers try to quietly put him aside, stop him before he says anything too crazy... stop him before he does something to get himself hurt. It's as if Mary forgot what the angel had told her. But I think it's something more. She loves him so much, her first born son. And her love for him was stronger than her support of a distant cause, no matter how holy, no matter what angels say. She would do anything, even label him as crazy, to keep him safe.

But God put faith in her for a good reason. She is the one who nurtured and cherished God's own son. And she is the one who answered God's call.

Eventually, she decided that to do anything for her son, meant to trust him. She had to stop and remember that moment when the angel first came. She had to decide to say yes to follow him again. By the end of his ministry, Mary had committed to support him.

She was there when he took his last breath, just as she had been there when he took his first. And, according to the Book of Acts, Mary took on the mantle of leadership among the earliest believers after the resurrection.

In Mary's life, we can see the reflection of our own discipleship experiences. Sometimes it is so easy to believe... to commit to the cost of discipleship. In those moments of clarity, when it is as if angels have shown us the path, we are both mystified and inspired. It seems so clear, "I can do this," we say, "here I am, God, I am ready and willing to do whatever you require." Those are the moments that we treasure, especially because they are so rare. Most days, there are no angelic visitations, no moments of holy clarity, no babies

dancing with joy. No, most days are filled with the day to day chores, doing laundry, going to work, worrying about your family's safety. Even if we never have to flee to Egypt like Mary did, we can all relate to the daily concerns that Mary faced. And the concerns only grew as Jesus grew and set out on his own. She struggled as we struggle between the demands of faith and the demands of family. But in the end, she was there when they crucified her son. Despite it all, he looked down at her in love. "Here is your mother," he said to his beloved disciple, "Care for her as I would."

Mary's journey of discipleship has twists and turns, peaks and valleys. Just like ours. We all have a moment when we proclaim YES, but that's not where it begins. Discipleship begins not when we grasp for Jesus, but when Jesus reaches out and grasps us. It continues, not because we have all the answers or we completely understand what is required or because we are always faithful. Discipleship continues because Jesus keeps working with us, forgiving us when we stumble and turn away, and calling us to follow him down the path of faith.

"Here is your mother, your cousin, your neighbor, "Jesus tells us, "Care for them as I would."

On Tuesday, we will light our candles and sing our carols and remember that moment when God's love was born. Today let us remember that young mother preparing for the birth of an incredible child. Let us remember that soon she will kiss her newborn child and she will know that she kissed the face of God.