



“The Power of Blessing”
Scripture – Luke 1:39-45
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, December 23, 2018

Why did Mary visit her older cousin Elizabeth? Let that question hang in the air for a moment, while we reflect on the context of today’s story. Immediately prior to our passage is the account of the angel Gabriel startling Mary with the news that she will conceive and bear a child. Visualize, if you can, some of the classic paintings of the Annunciation – two elegant figures frozen in the moment of the announcement. Luke writes that upon hearing Gabriel’s news, Mary replied, “How can this be?”

Now, our gospel writer, Luke, was obviously not present at the birth announcement. His story may be based on interviews he conducted decades after the event. Perhaps he ran down some of Mary’s friends, and they said, “Well, here’s what she told us.”

That gave everyone – including Luke – plenty of time to dress up Mary’s reply into something with a ring of reverence. After all, by then, Mary was a hallowed individual – the mother of the Messiah.

But, if we revert to the instant Mary learned of her pregnancy, when she was a mere teenager, poor and unmarried, the news had to have been both shocking and frightening. I suspect that her reaction to the life-changing news might have been more along the lines of: “You must be mad! I’m just a child!”

Whatever words Mary actually uttered, Gabriel chose to comfort her by relaying an equally startling piece of news. He said, “Your elderly cousin Elizabeth, who is past the child-bearing years? She is in her six month of being great with child!”

Within that context, we approach the opening line of today’s passage. “In those days, Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country.” While it may sound as if Mary quickly scooted down the road and over to Elizabeth’s house, that is hardly so. From Nazareth to the Judean hill country is 90 miles. It may have taken her a week to walk there – not something she would do without a compelling reason. So why did Mary make the long journey to Cousin Elizabeth?

There had to be a more pressing reason than to congratulate Elizabeth and to say, “I want you to be the first to know.”

Lest we forget, having a baby 2,000 years ago was a much different experience than it is today. There were no blood tests, there were no regular visits to one’s obstetrician, and there was no sonogram of a cute little blob. Back then, having a baby was dangerous and many died in child birth.

Or, maybe she went to Elizabeth because she was afraid that Joseph would not stick by her. What if Joseph were to say: “I’m sorry, but you’re on your own.” Perhaps Mary was frightened and went to Elizabeth with the hope that a bit of her cousin’s courage would rub off on her.

Or, maybe Mary made the arduous journey because she knew the neighbors’ tongues would begin to wag as soon as she began to show, and she knew Elizabeth would not drop a heavy load of guilt on her.

If *you* need to talk to someone, to whom do you turn? Who can you count on to be empathetic? Who will listen to you when it is obvious that you need someone to share your burden? Who cares about you enough that in their words and their actions they will remind you that you are worthy of respect; worthy of trust; worthy of love?

Elizabeth proved to be that type of stellar individual. As soon as Elizabeth set eyes on Mary, she showered her with a blessing. “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

Elizabeth’s blessing assured Mary that she was so much more than a teenage peasant who – now pregnant – was the target of gossip and innuendo. Elizabeth’s blessing was powerful. It bolstered Mary’s confidence and unleashed her courage. Elizabeth inspired Mary by reassuring her that even though the path ahead would be demanding, she could handle it.

And what was Mary’s response to the blessing? She found her voice. She sang out the words that have come to be known as the “Magnificat.” She belted out, “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.” Mary knew all too well her low status as a poor, teenage girl with no social, political, religious or economic clout and living in a world of brutal Roman occupation. She was one of thousands usually overlooked and who never made a noticeable impact on the world. However, Elizabeth’s blessing touched Mary’s core and infused her with the confidence she would need for the challenge ahead.

Do you know the story of Keri Blakinger? She was a medal-winning figure skater in pairs, but when her skating partner left her for a different partner, she crumbled. She was only 17, and fell into depression.

Looking back on it, Keri says, “I was in a really dark place. It seemed like the end of the world, which was overly dramatic. But at 17, I could not imagine a world other than skating. I fell apart and started using drugs.”

After her first semester in college, she could see no future, so she walked out onto a high bridge – nine stories above the ground – and jumped. Somehow she survived. She hit a moss covered rock with about a quarter of an inch of water on it, and when she hit it, she fractured her back, but she slid. Miraculously, she was able to get up and walk away.

You would think that would be a clear sign that she was supposed to do something with her life, but Keri was just angry at herself that she could do nothing right; not even kill herself.

She continued with classes and using drugs off and on. Eventually it caught up with her. Her senior year, she was arrested for heroin possession. She was immediately suspended and banned from campus. She was sentenced to prison and spent two years behind bars.

Recently interviewed by Terri Gross, Keri said, “You think of prison as a place where there’s a ton of rules. But in one sense there are no rules, because the officers can put you in solitary confinement for almost nothing, or they can just make something up. There are plenty good officers, but prison is their own little kingdom. I knew that any day I could just be walking to the mess hall and some officer could be having a bad day and decide to put me in solitary. And that is an incredibly terrifying experience.”

One time an officer claimed to have found drugs in her cell. Someone else said they were hers, but they decided to put four of the prisoners in isolation. Keri said she was alone in a barren, neon white room with no clock, no sense of how long she would be there, and almost no possessions. Very quickly she lost track of time. She felt like she was going in and out of being awake.

She said, “It felt like being buried alive. I didn’t think it would be that bad, but I handled it worse than some people do. Many people think, ‘I like spending time alone. Solitary confinement is probably not that bad.’ But no, it really was that bad. I was not sure that I would be the same afterward. Some people do it for years and somehow come out in one piece, but on the second day, I was plotting ways to kill myself. I wondered if I could stand on the sink and hit my head on the bed at the right angle...I still have nightmares about it.”

A few days after she survived jumping off the bridge, a friend had encouraged her to get a dog because she would have to take care of it. When she was arrested, the dog was left in her house and for some time, Keri had no idea what happened to her dog.

Later, she learned that the property manager had contacted a family in a nearby town. They already had a dog, but decided they could take another one for a few weeks. They fell in love with Keri’s dog and said they would keep it until she was out of prison—no matter how long.

When Keri was released, she wanted her dog back, but after two years, she did not believe the family would be willing – until it actually happened. That was the first time she met Floriana and David. Keri could not thank them enough for all they had done. But that was just the beginning. Floriana introduced Keri to her friends, and would just show up occasionally with groceries. Then, one day, she asked Keri to housesit for them. Keri said, “That was huge. Here I was, a felon with a long history of screwing up everything, and they trusted me to watch their house and care for their dog and cat. They were the first people who had not known me pre-prison, who were willing to take a chance on a felon and let me into their lives.”

I do not know anything specific this family said to Keri, but it is obvious they blessed her. Through their words and gestures they told her that she was worthy of respect; worthy of trust; worthy of love. Like young Mary who leaned on Elizabeth for support, Keri needed someone to believe in her and to share God’s love with her. And it made a powerful impact. Keri went back to school and graduated from Cornell. Today she is a reporter for the Houston Chronicle. Her focus with the newspaper? What else, but criminal justice.¹

Life can be brutal. Dashed dreams and unmet expectations rock our confidence. Unseen obstacles, unfair treatment, and bad decisions conspire to drop us into the abyss of despair. But a blessing has the power to halt our slide into darkness and to throw us a lifeline so we can pull ourselves up.

Can you recall people in your own life who pronounced a blessing on you? They likely did not use the word “blessing,” but that is what they gave you when they expressed their confidence in you and demonstrated their trust in you. They helped you slay the voices in your head telling you that you were neither strong enough nor dependable. They empowered you to overcome the challenges you face.

Tomorrow evening, we will celebrate the birth of Jesus. His birth is God’s blessing on a hurting world – a blessing in which God declares that we are loved, no matter our failures. A blessing intended to instill in us joy and confidence and hope. May you open your heart, your mind, and your soul so that Christ may be born in you once again.

NOTES

1. The story of Keri Blakinger is from a Terry Gross interview on *Fresh Air*, entitled “From Convict to Criminal Justice Reporter: I Was So Lucky To Come Out Of This,” December 12, 2018.