

“The Dance of Waiting”

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Luke 1.39-55

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Humanity and divinity are intricately tied together in the Gospel reading today. Here we have the two aspects dancing with one another, celebrating the joining of humanity and divinity. We have the privilege of overhearing the interaction between Elizabeth and Mary, who are relatives. Together, in an amazing moment, Mary and Elizabeth are celebrating the joy of God dwelling with humans. Mary has offered a proclamation, exclaiming how good God is and has been to her. These are two ordinary women, sharing their experiences.

Sojourner Truth advocated for women’s rights and spoke to the beauty of this humanity and divinity mixed together in her speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?” Her strong faith background guided her in difficult times as she fought against slavery in the United States. As Black woman in the 1800s, she faced criticism and hatred and violence. During the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention of 1851 she participated in lectures, some regarding women’s voting rights.

A clergyman in the audience spoke out against women voting and argued that women could not be equal to men, since “Christ wasn’t a woman.”¹ Sojourner Truth spoke truth that day, proving to the crowd that she had worked just as hard as any man and had endured just as much and that she was a woman. After giving multiple examples, she looked at the minister and said, “Then that little man in black there, he says women can’t have as much rights as men, ‘cause Christ wasn’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with it!”²

“From God and from woman.” This says so much – not only did it make Sojourner Truth’s point that women could not be denied rights on the fact that Jesus, the Savior, was male, but she also reminds us that Christ was fully human and fully God – born of a humble woman – raised by this woman – cared for by this woman.

This Luke reading has always been one of my favorite passages. We observe these two ordinary women as they share an experience they have in common. One of the reasons I love this passage is because it is one of the few scripture readings where we see the Trinity clearly experienced by two people. Mary is carrying the Christ child, while the Holy Spirit moves in Elizabeth and she is surprised by the baby moving inside her, while God blesses both of them together. This must have been a truly stunning and unique experience for the two women.

They recognize how special this moment is, as well, because Elizabeth says, “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

¹ Elizabeth Ellis, “Mary of Nazareth I” in *The Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible*, eds. Dennis E. Smith and Michael E. Williams. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 32-33.

² *Ibid.*, 34.

fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” Elizabeth knows that Mary has been blessed, before Mary can even speak a word. The Holy Spirit has filled Elizabeth with knowledge and wisdom that cannot be seen.

In thinking about the human and divine being intricately woven within this passage, it is also interesting to realize that here, in this one place, are two ordinary women carrying both the one who will proclaim the Good News, and the Good News itself.³ John the Baptist was human, and Jesus, the Good News sent to all people, is both human and divine. This combination of fully human and fully God has confused people over the years – those who can do math know that someone cannot possibly be one hundred percent human and one hundred percent divine – because that equals two hundred percent! But it is a mystery that makes Christ that much more important that makes him the Messiah, because he is able to understand humans, but is also God.

Theologian William Placher writes that, “By uniting humanity with the divine, Christ changes what it is to be human,” meaning that we are able to reconnect with God in a whole new way because Christ has changed how humanity and divinity interact.⁴ Fred Craddock, another theologian, said that in Mary’s story, “tradition is interrupted.”⁵ Mary’s song reflects that of women before her who cried out to God with gratitude. Yet, what is different is that women like Hannah and Sarah asked for a child – a baby was not even on Mary’s mind at that point in her life. God had chosen women to bring important people in the world, but Mary was a different person than those who went before her.

The authors of the Gospels tell of these amazing, miraculous stories, but we don’t necessarily hear about the human experiences of Mary and Elizabeth. Just think how Mary must have felt as she walked all the way to see Elizabeth. Her feet were probably sore, she was probably tired, and if she was wise, she took some bread with her to keep her satisfied until she reached her relative’s house. For Mary to take this difficult journey there must have been a reason. Being in her first trimester she would have been exhausted all the time.

Perhaps, as a new mom, she was looking for some comfort, or words of advice from Elizabeth, who had gone through much of her pregnancy at this point. She took on more than just a pregnancy – Mary became the bearer of the Christ child. Perhaps she was unsure that she had done the right thing.⁶ Mary was quick to tell the angel she would bear God’s son – but maybe now it has all sunk in and she’s just a little confused.

Before Mary can even speak one word, Elizabeth is brimming with joy, filled with the Holy Spirit, and reassures Mary of the great things God has done. Elizabeth can barely contain her excitement and shares this with Mary, whether Mary was looking for reassurance or not. In this moment with the two women together, they are able to give each other the community they

³ Stephen A. Cooper, “Luke 1.39-45 (46-55),” in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 93.

⁴ William C. Placher, *Jesus the Savior: The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 46.

⁵ Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker, eds. *Preaching Through the Christian Year C*. (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, International: 1993), 22.

⁶ Robert Redman, “Luke 1.39-45 (46-55),” in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 92.

could not find anywhere else.⁷ How many people would believe that Elizabeth, a woman past child bearing age, would be carrying a child who would one day become John the Baptist? How many people would listen to Mary say that she was young, unmarried, and pregnant, carrying God's child? Where else would they find the support, but from each other? The only person to believe someone who has experienced a miracle, might be someone else who has experienced a miracle. Perhaps they merely want to witness together the greatness of God as they have experienced the Creator.

Somehow, John the Baptist knows what is going on, even though he is just a baby in Elizabeth's womb. The scripture reads that he leapt in her womb, and the Hebrew word for "leap" could also mean to spring about, doing some little dance. John's response is movement – action. He can't sit still! He's literally jumping and showing his excitement through movement. This is his response to his Savior – a celebratory dance. How do we respond in movement?

Mary's response, besides caring for the Christ child and raising him, is the Magnificat – a song. She is singing God's joy. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant." She responds by singing God's praises. How do we respond in singing? In the Magnificat we are able to hear more of Mary's humanity, and perhaps can relate to her as she tells of how God has lifted up the lowly.

She proclaims all the wonderful things God has done for her – though she claims she has done nothing to deserve it. Mary is very relatable – she is human, given an unimaginable task and even though she is giving birth to the Savior, surely she had some of the struggles every parent goes through. This task was important, but unlike any ever known before. We are given tasks by God, as well, but we must choose how we respond. Will we do so with dance? With joy? With singing? Mary knows this child is more than a child. She recognizes that this child brings peace.

While Christ promises peace, we cannot wait for God's peace to just happen. God has promised the fulfillment of God's realm, but we do not know the time or day. We cannot just sit back and condemn what is happening in the world – we have to make a difference by responding to the good news God has given us, trying to make a change. Whether we are singing or dancing or sitting with those who are lonely and feel unsafe in the world, we are called to respond to God's words of peace and justice. We are called to jump up, to leap out of our seats and to sing God's grace and mercy to those who need to hear it.

Episcopal priest Rev. Anne Emry wrote about Mary in her blog entry "The Song of Mary." Rev. Emry wrote this many years ago – shortly after the shooting in Newtown, Connecticut in 2012. She writes: "Mary's song rings in our ears, and calls us to disrupt the hold violence has on our world. She sings of a future where all children are safe from violence. She sings of a future where people have homes and food and jobs. Her words are in solidarity with us."⁸ God being in solidarity with humanity is part of the Advent message. Emry goes on to

⁷ Michael S. Bennett, "Luke 1.39-45 (46-55)," in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 94.

⁸ Anne Emry, "The Song of Mary," <https://sacredstorydotorg.wordpress.com/2012/12/21/the-song-of-mary/#more-371>.

address how Mary's words talk as if these things have happened already. She writes: "Mary sings of a future worth struggling for. It is a song with a marching beat—she sets our feet on the path of unfinished business. She sings prophetically, she sings about something that hasn't happened yet. She sings of a hopeful vision for the future because she can see farther than the rest of us, and she keeps us from giving in and giving up. She sings to keep our hearts full of hope."⁹

May you be filled with Mary's song, her good news, and the hope of the future. Know that God is in solidarity with us and wishes to invest in our community so that we may thrive in God's words to us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁹ <https://sacredstorydotorg.wordpress.com/2012/12/21/the-song-of-mary/#more-371>