

## **“This Year, Give the Gift of Friendship”**

**Luke 1:39-45**

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This morning, our attention is drawn to Mary’s visit to Elizabeth soon after Mary discovered she was going to have a baby. Only Luke writes about it, which does not surprise me. He was a physician and knew how much people needed one another when they received unexpected news about their health. In addition, Luke told the birth of Jesus from Mary’s perspective, whereas Matthew relayed it through Joseph’s experience.

You recall from the previous passage, after the angel, Gabriel, told Mary she was going to have a baby, he told her that her relative, Elizabeth, was also expecting. This was probably as startling to Mary as the news of her own pregnancy, since Elizabeth was far beyond the natural child-bearing age.

Immediately, Mary traveled to the outskirts of Jerusalem to see Elizabeth. Even though Elizabeth was unaware of Mary’s pregnancy, the baby inside her moved upon hearing Mary’s voice. At that moment, God revealed Mary’s secret to Elizabeth, which prompted her to bless Mary for her faith and obedience.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth and Zechariah for three months, or until Elizabeth gave birth to a baby named John. We know him as the last Old Testament prophet, John the Baptist, the one who prepared the way for Jesus. After John was born, Mary returned to Nazareth and Joseph to prepare for the arrival of Jesus.

**What message do you think Luke was sending his readers through this tender part of his birth narrative?** I pondered this last week and believe it could have been this. **He wanted them, like Mary, to seek the support of family and friends when facing big challenges or carrying heavy burdens.**

Why did Gabriel tell Mary about Elizabeth’s pregnancy? He knew she would need the counsel and support of someone who was traveling down a similar path.

Sure, Joseph could help her, and he did. He proved to be a wonderful husband and father. I’m confident her parents did all they could, too.

Mary needed more, though. She needed to talk to someone who could help her put the pieces of this puzzle together. Who better to do this than Elizabeth?

So, for three months, Mary stayed with Elizabeth, which must have been as much a blessing to Elizabeth as it was to Mary. Elizabeth, who was much older, served as Mary’s mentor, and Mary, who was very young, took care of Elizabeth when she needed help the most, the final three months of her pregnancy.

**What burden are you carrying today?** Is it getting too heavy to carry alone?

**What intimidating challenge are you facing?** Are you afraid and worried you are not up to the task?

Who can help you carry your load or climb this mountain? Where could you find a safe place to fall? Who could help you put the pieces of your puzzle together? Whose heart do you trust to provide a listening ear and wise counsel? Who could offer the encouragement you need that would push you over the finish line, or at least get you farther down the road?

**Who needs your help today?** Who needs you to be their Elizabeth, offering support, advice, guidance, encouragement and a blessing?

Luke said Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit when Mary entered her home, which meant God empowered her to help Mary at the most vulnerable and critical time of Mary's life. I have to believe God will do the same for you when you open your door and make room for someone who is struggling.

Is there a community in America carrying a heavier burden or facing a more intimidating challenge than Newtown, Connecticut? Nine days ago, a disturbed young man burst his way into the Sandy Hook elementary school and took the lives of twenty innocent children and six brave adults. Almost every conversation last week included this tragedy as the entire country grieved for these families.

Like many of you, I watched the prayer vigil last Sunday night hosted by the town clergy. I was very impressed with the way it was conducted and the ministers from all walks of life and religions who participated. Every faith tradition in Newtown was included on the program, and it was easy to see these religious leaders were friends who had worked together on behalf of the good people of Newtown before that night. Rabbi Shaul Praver affirmed their camaraderie the next day when asked by a reporter about the ease with which the ministers worked together that evening.

I especially appreciated the opening remarks by Reverend Matt Crebbin, pastor of the Newtown Congregational Church. He laid the groundwork for what was to come by telling those in the auditorium and the millions watching on television why the ministers were hosting this prayer vigil.

In his remarks, he continually used the word, together. He told his audience how much everyone in Newtown needed time alone, but also time together, crying, hugging, praying and supporting one another. "We are not alone," he told them, "and we never will be."

Mary needed to know she was not alone and did not have to travel down this unfamiliar road without encouragement and support. This was why Gabriel told her about Elizabeth and the Holy Spirit empowered Elizabeth to be her mentor.

**I wonder what God wants you to know this week about someone who will attend your Christmas festivities.** Which relative or friend will need encouraging? Who will be in need of your friendship so you can help them carry their burden or meet their challenge? I hope you will listen to God carefully and follow His lead.