

“Mary Christmas”

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 this encounter, which does not surprise me.

Luke 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, which meant he gave us more details of Mary’s travels and experiences than Matthew.

We learned from the previous passage Mary was not only informed by the angel Gabriel that she was going to have a baby, but her relative, Elizabeth, was, too. 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 it was time for Elizabeth to give birth to a baby to be named John. We know him through scripture as John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet who introduced Jesus to his listeners and prepared the way for Jesus’ ministry.

After John was born, Mary left Elizabeth and Zechariah. She returned to Nazareth so she and Joseph could prepare for the arrival of Jesus.

I am confident Mary's visit with Elizabeth and Zechariah was transformative. It gave Mary the confidence and clarity she needed to travel down the unfamiliar roads she would walk.

Out of all the stories about Mary that could have been included in Luke's gospel, why do you think this one was selected? Perhaps it was chosen to help us understand the importance of relationships and community.

People need people when facing big challenges and heavy burdens. This was certainly true for Mary and Elizabeth, and it is true for us.

What did Mary need from Elizabeth? Above all, she needed someone who would love her unconditionally and listen to her without judging her.

Mary would not be able to keep this secret much longer, and she had to be concerned about how her friends and neighbors would react upon hearing the news of her pregnancy. Would they accuse her of being promiscuous and condemn her for hurting Joseph? Would they ostracize her or run her out of Nazareth? Would they blame Mary's parents for her apparent indiscretions?

Who better for Mary to talk to than Elizabeth? In some ways, Elizabeth's journey was very similar to Mary's.

To a great degree, Elizabeth had lived her married life in shame because she was unable to have children, a plight worse than death for women in that culture. Elizabeth knew what it was like to disappoint a husband and be fodder for gossip.

No wonder Mary made that long trek to the countryside outside of Jerusalem. As Greg Smith, my friend and Bible study companion said in one of our conversations, "To get out of the glare of an unwed pregnancy, Mary went to live with an older woman who knew what shame was."

Apparently, Elizabeth and Zechariah provided the safe place Mary needed to voice her questions and ponder. In their home she found love, acceptance, encouragement and solitude.

Mary needed more than a listening ear and a secluded place to stay during those early months of her pregnancy, though. She also needed someone who would help her sort through

her confusion and chart a path forward. As humbled and honored as Mary was to be chosen by God to give birth to his son, I am certain she was scared to death.

It is hard to figure out what to do next when you are frightened and bewildered. Every option seems risky and dangerous.

In times like these, you need to talk to someone who understands how you feel and gives wise advice on what to do. Now you understand why Gabriel told Mary about Elizabeth's pregnancy.

Elizabeth and Zechariah must have been a blessing to Mary. I want to believe the three months Mary spent with them in their home strengthened her spirit and prepared her for the many challenges she would encounter on this divine mission.

I also believe Mary was a blessing to Elizabeth and Zechariah. The younger Mary was able to help the much older Elizabeth by waiting on her and allowing her to rest. As a matter of fact, I believe the reason Mary stayed with them until Elizabeth gave birth was more for Elizabeth's wellbeing than her own.

People need people when facing big challenges and carrying heavy burdens. Today's text is a prime example of the value and importance of relationships.

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

What intimidating challenge are you facing? Do you worry 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 voice your questions and a quiet place to ponder?

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?

Will you reach out to them and seek their advice? Will you put down your defenses and talk about your confusion, doubts, struggles, worries and fears?

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

Loving someone with a problem is not easy, is it? It can stretch your patience and your pocketbook. Rarely is there a quick or painless solution.

Who can help you be a good listener and wise counselor? Who can help you stay the course when you want to walk away?

The answer lies in the way Luke described Elizabeth in this passage. "Elizabeth," Luke wrote, "was filled with the Holy Spirit." (Luke 1:41)

God enabled and empowered Elizabeth to be everything Mary needed at the most critical time in 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 needs affirming and encouraging.