

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Fourth Sunday of Advent**  
**Sunday, December 17, 2023**  
**10am**

Text: Luke 1:26-45

Theme: Those who dream...are not alone (Love)

[prayer]

This week we go back in time from last week's Scripture lesson on the Magnificat – first just a little way back so Luke can set the scene for Mary's song of joy. And then a long way back to a conversation between King David, the prophet Nathan, and God.

The Magnificat was not prompted by the angel Gabriel's surprise visit to Mary – the scene we call the Annunciation. It was prompted by a different visit – Mary's visit to her relative Elizabeth – what we call the Visitation.

Let's think about that word visitation. Last week Carol and I met to discuss goals for growing our visitation ministry here at Community UMC. One of the main purposes of our new Care Team is to carry out the ministry of visiting members and friends of the church. We cannot underestimate the spiritual value of visiting each other and our neighbors in our homes. Jesus spoke specifically about visiting the sick (Mt 25:31-46), and right now our visitation ministry focuses on that. But the Apostle Paul, through his own example, expanded visitation to the community at large. For Paul, the ministry of visitation is not just for when a member or neighbor is in crisis. Visitation is part of the regular spiritual maintenance of the body of Christ. Through the ministry of visitation, we build stronger relationships with each other. We teach and shepherd each other in the context of our everyday lives. And we bear the Gospel beyond the walls of the church (cf. Acts 20:20-21, 28).

Visitation has always been part of the church's ministry though it takes different forms depending on time and place and tradition. John Wesley expanded home visitation to include visiting people in hospitals, prisons, shelters and soup

kitchens, and their places of work. The point is that visitation is one way that Christians embody our mission in the world. We have been sent beyond the doors of the church as ambassadors of God's love. And the greatest expression of God's love was the Incarnation where God visited *us* in human form as Jesus Christ.

[pause]

There are several reasons why Luke chose to include Mary's visit to Elizabeth in his gospel. Certainly, the main reason was to connect the story of John the Baptist with the story of Jesus. But another reason is the emotional and spiritual solidarity that Mary and Elizabeth expressed for each other. Both women were entering motherhood under unusual circumstances. Elizabeth had been barren her entire life and now, like Sarah before her, was becoming a mother in her twilight years. In comparison, Mary's life was just beginning. Newly betrothed, suddenly she found herself pregnant in a strange and scandalous way. Though they were related, we don't know how well these women knew each other. We know they lived far apart – Mary in Galilee in the north of Israel, Elizabeth in the southern Judean hill country. We also know there was a big age difference between them. Despite these differences they were drawn to each other by their shared experience of a miracle pregnancy.

When Mary wondered *how* she would get pregnant, the angel Gabriel assured her that nothing is impossible for God. As proof, he told her about Elizabeth's pregnancy: "Even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled 'unable to conceive' is now six months pregnant" (Lk 1:36 CEB). After Mary consented to God's miracle, she hurried south to see her relative. She didn't go because she mistrusted the angel and needed proof. She went because she wanted to know that she was not alone. Even as she accepted God's destiny for her, Mary also needed to share her miracle with someone! She needed someone to help her confirm her faith. She needed a companion who could interpret and affirm the divine appointment she had been given.

I did not know it at the time, but I received my divine appointment to this church two months before the District Superintendent rang me with the news. In January of 2022 I was scrolling through our conference's open appointments and saw this church was listed. Not all appointments are open, but this one was, meaning that any clergy person in the conference who was interested could throw their hat in

the ring. I remember looking at the appointment and getting goosebumps, which is one of the ways I know the Holy Spirit is near. But I ignored the feeling because I had already been told I would remain at the church in Olympia. I did tell my mentor about it though, a little wistfully. Two months later, when I found out I would be moving to this church after all, I met her for coffee to tell her the news. She looked me in the eyes and said, “Amanda, I didn’t say anything at the time, but when you told me about the church in Coeur d’Alene, I knew you would be leaving. It was the look in your eyes and the sound of your voice. It was clear you had received a calling, even if you weren’t ready to accept it yet.”

We need people in our lives, like my mentor and Elizabeth, who can help us hold our dreams and keep the faith, especially when we are not ready or able to do it ourselves. How might the Christmas story have been different if Mary had carried her divine appointment in isolation? Would she have been able to sing her song of joy if Elizabeth had not first affirmed the good news growing inside her? Would she have been able to withstand nine months of social rejection without Elizabeth’s support? Dreams are beautiful, but they can be overwhelming, especially the God-sized ones. We are not meant to dream God’s dreams alone. God’s call may come to us as individuals, but we find the strength to say yes to those dreams in a community of believers who can affirm God’s calling. We need one another’s encouragement to build God’s kingdom.

Elizabeth, for her part, had already entered her confinement when Mary came to visit. I imagine, given her unusual circumstances, that her pregnancy was a lonely one. Mary’s surprise appearance on her doorstep may have been a welcome reprieve. Here was someone who was interested in Elizabeth’s pregnancy not because they were being nosy, but because they genuinely wanted to hear about what God was doing in and through her. Mary’s curiosity was for the sake of connection – connecting her experience of God with Elizabeth’s experience – tracing the throughline of the Spirit between their stories and celebrating the work of God in Elizabeth’s life.

We all share in the ministry of visitation, whether as part of a team of people or as individuals. The ministry of visitation is the ministry of connection. The Holy Spirit draws us into relationships with each other, sometimes in surprising ways with surprising people. Whichever way the Spirit draws us together, it is for the purpose of welcoming, listening, encouraging, and blessing each other so that we

can nurture the confidence to live the vocations God has given each one of us. Like Mary and Elizabeth, we trace the throughline of the Spirit between *our* stories and discover that we carry our dreams together. I think this is love in its most basic form – the assurance that we are not alone.

[pause]

A word on our Old Testament lesson. Up until this Sunday, we have read from the prophet Isaiah. But today our reading was from the Book of Second Samuel. King David wanted very much to build a permanent home for God's Spirit. But God told the prophet Nathan, who was David's spiritual advisor, that David was not to build this temple. Someone else would build the temple. But more importantly, the temple isn't the point. The point is that God's loving Spirit had been and always would be with God's people. God promised David that He would make a dynasty of his line, provide a permanent home for the people, and shepherd them always.

So, David was left holding this dream of a house for God. Eventually, his son Solomon built a beautiful temple in Jerusalem. But it fills us with wonder to know that many years later David's dream took on a new dimension in the womb of Mary. God's Spirit rested not on a cedar house but on a young woman, and God made Himself a temple out of a human body in the infant Jesus. God's promises to David were fulfilled in a way that David did not imagine. Jesus' kingdom would not emanate from a physical site of political and religious power, but from the Spirit dwelling in human flesh.

Sometimes God's dreams take centuries and many, many generations of people to unfold. God's dream of Emmanuel – God with us – is still unfolding today. The Incarnation did not end when Jesus ascended into heaven. The Incarnation now continues in us, Jesus' followers, the church. We are incarnations of God's love in the world, carrying the seeds of God's kingdom within us, visiting hope, peace, and joy upon our neighbors. And we are not alone. We have each other and we have the Holy Spirit.

If you are carrying a God-sized dream that feels overwhelming, I challenge you to find one person in this congregation to share that dream with you. If you have a testimony of faith, I encourage you to find one person to bear witness. If you are feeling isolated and need a spiritual companion, or if you are feeling discouraged

and need affirmation and support, please reach out. I know our Care Team would love to stretch its wings! If you are none of these things, perhaps you can provide a listening ear and words of affirmation. Perhaps you can be the loving presence of God to someone else.

Let's be Mary and Elizabeth to each other.

Amen.