

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Fourth Sunday of Advent
Sunday, December 18, 2022
10am

Text: Luke 1:39-58 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

When I was eight years old, my maternal grandparents moved from Colorado to Spokane so they could be close to family. For many years they would come to our home on Thanksgiving and we would go to theirs on Christmas. The sound of the doorbell ringing on those days always caused a thrill of anticipation, because when the door opened there would be my grandparents, standing at the threshold with big smiles and warm hugs, so happy to be with their people.

Our patterns of gathering as a family have shifted as my grandparents have aged and grandkids have grown up into grand-adults. But the memory of generations warmly greeting each other at the threshold of our homes still feels magical. It is one of the memories that most captures the feelings of light and love that I associate with Christmas.

Dr. Christine Hong, the featured commentator for our worship series, describes Elizabeth and Mary's greeting in today's Scripture lesson as a physical and spiritual threshold moment. "Elizabeth greets Mary on the threshold not only of her door," she writes, "but the threshold of something new in Mary's life and for the world."¹

Dr. Hong is the daughter of Korean immigrants, and it has been a privilege reading her unique theological reflections these last few weeks in our Advent devotional. I want to share some of what she wrote about her family this week because it perfectly illuminates our Scripture lesson. Dr. Hong writes:

¹ "Commentary on Luke 1:39-58" by Dr. Christine J. Hong. Sermon Planning Guide. A Sanctified Art, LLC. sanctifiedart.org.

“My mother used to say that back in the days of their immigration, whoever met you at the airport decided your destiny. In other words, whoever greets you at the threshold as you become a new immigrant determines the direction your life moves... When my parents crossed over from being Korean to being Korean American, it was the local church pastor (also a Korean immigrant) who greeted them at the threshold, after they made their way through borders and customs at LAX. He picked them up in his car and took them to an apartment complex to get them housed. Next, he took them to meet members of his church who worked at ticketing at LAX. My parents worked the next few years at Korean Airlines ticketing and baggage claim, hourly jobs that paid the bills and gave them footing in a new country. The final stop was the Korean immigrant church that would be their community as they settled in a new country, with a new language, and, in some ways, a new understanding of Christian faith. It was the Korean immigrant church folk who anchored them to this new land. My parents arrived and were greeted by Korean American people who embraced them, settled them, and invited them to participate in building sustaining faith and peoplehood together.”

[pause]

Embraced. Settled. Invited. This is the language of hospitality and hospitality is at the core of our Gospel lesson.

Luke does not say why Mary hurries to the hill country to visit her relative Elizabeth. At Mary’s annunciation, the angel Gabriel told her about Elizabeth’s own miraculous pregnancy: “Your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren” (Luke 1:36). Perhaps Mary goes to confirm the miracle. Information did not travel as quickly then as it does now, so it is probable that Elizabeth’s extended family did not know she was pregnant; in fact, Luke tells us that she spent the first five months of her pregnancy in seclusion.

Mary hurries to the Judean hill country to see Elizabeth, and she goes carrying the secret of her own miraculous pregnancy. It is too soon for her to feel the infant Jesus quickening in her womb. All she has is the word of the angel. And the angel told her that Elizabeth, who was barren and well past menopause, is already six months with child.

Perhaps Mary goes to confirm what the angel has told her. But I believe she goes seeking the only person who could understand the miracle growing inside her. Like the Korean-American church greeting Dr. Hong's parents at the airport, we long to know and be known by people who share our life circumstances. Particularly when we are going through periods of great change and distress, we look for peers who have walked that road ahead of us, who can draw us a map to help us navigate, who can make us feel a little less alone in the questions and the unknown.

I believe that was the companionship Mary was seeking from her older relative. Elizabeth had never been pregnant before, but even so she had six months of experience on Mary. Who else could Mary turn to? Who else could tell her what to expect as her body began to stretch and change? Who else could understand the strange and holy way she found herself pregnant? She is having a baby out of wedlock; her own mother and the women in her community are unlikely to give her the support she needs. So, she makes the journey to the one person she hopes will understand. She stands at the threshold of Elizabeth's home and, with her heart in her throat, raises her fist and knocks.

[pause]

Many years later, Jesus will say to his followers "Knock, and the door will be opened for you" (Matthew 7:7). He was encouraging his disciples to ask God boldly in faith for God's blessing. Perhaps he learned that boldness from his mother, for Mary's boldness is indeed met with blessing. Elizabeth swings open the door and at the sound of Mary's greeting – "Hello, Elizabeth; it's me, Mary" – the baby inside her womb kicks ferociously. The baby is John the Baptist. John is the great prophet who will prepare the way for Jesus' ministry. The infant John in Elizabeth's womb recognizes the infant Jesus in Mary's womb. The Holy Spirit excites the baby, and his excitement causes Elizabeth to look at Mary. And when she looks, she sees more than just her young and vulnerable relative, maybe a little dusty from the hurried trip north. She looks and she sees the mother of the long-promised Messiah. She looks and she sees God at work in Mary.

In response to this deep spiritual recognition, a prophetic blessing pours from Elizabeth's lips. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (vv. 43).

[pause]

Blessed are you.

Elizabeth does not greet Mary with scorn or condemnation or rejection. Nor does she patronize her – an older woman showing the younger what’s what. Instead, she welcomes Mary. She welcomes her with powerful words of joy and encouragement. At the threshold of a huge and overwhelming change in Mary’s life, Elizabeth blesses Mary with a rich affirmation of who God has called her to be: The mother of Jesus.

Scripture teaches us that we have the power to both curse and bless. This is a power that God has given us – the ability to turn our words into weapons that wound, or a healing balm that uplifts, dignifies, inspires. We long to have words of blessing and affirmation spoken over us, particularly at Christmas when we want to feel the hope, peace, love, and joy that God promises. Our souls long to know their worth.

This past week was not an easy week. I found myself shedding tears on more than one occasion – tears because of unkind words and criticism, tears because of the pain and grief so many people are experiencing, tears because sometimes the world just feels hopeless. But I also found myself crying tears of gratitude and relief over kind gestures and words of encouragement. Those tears were holy because they were a reminder that I was not alone in the confusion and the overwhelm. God keeps showing up – sometimes in big ways, but more often in the simple, daily work of being seen by another person and reminded that you are God’s beloved.

And oh, what God can do in us when we know we are loved by God! Elizabeth’s prophetic blessing evokes a prophetic response from Mary. From *her lips* pours the Magnificat, one of the most profound pieces of poetry Scripture offers. This is Mary’s song of praise to God. She sings in the present-tense, for this is not a song about what God has done or what God will do, but what God *is doing* in and through the child growing in her womb. This child brings liberation to the poor and oppressed; this child humbles the proud and lifts the lowly; this child feeds the hungry and sends the rich away empty. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,” Mary says, “for he has looked with favor on the

lowly state of his servant” (v. 46b-48a). In Jesus, God blesses and affirms our humanity by assuming our human weakness in his own body, choosing to come among us as a helpless infant. God looks with favor upon Mary’s lowliness – upon our lowliness – and says, “I choose you. I choose you to bear my light and love into the world.”

Elizabeth’s blessing empowers Mary to claim the love and grace that God has extended to her and lean confidently into her role as God-bearer. Our words of blessing have the same power. They are a means of God’s grace in a world that is starved for blessing. When we say to someone “Blessed are you” we are affirming their beloved worth as a child of God. We are affirming that we see God in them. Never underestimate that power, for it is the power to inspire, to heal, to set free.

As we step into this final week of Advent and are hurrying about our holiday preparations, moving with anticipation toward the manger in Bethlehem, may we pause to be present to the people we meet on the thresholds of our daily activities. May we speak words of blessing over them. In our shared humanity, our shared lowliness, may we offer them God’s grace and remind them of their belovedness. And may we receive and be reminded of the same. Blessed are you, friends.

Amen.