

**39** In those days Mary arose and went with haste into <sup>r</sup>the hill country, to a town in Judah, **40** and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. **41** And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth <sup>s</sup>was filled with the Holy Spirit, **42** and she exclaimed with a loud cry, <sup>t</sup>“Blessed are you among women, and <sup>u</sup>blessed is <sup>v</sup>the fruit of your womb! **43** And why is this granted to me that the mother of <sup>w</sup>my Lord should come to me? **44** For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. **45** And <sup>x</sup>blessed is she who believed that there would be <sup>7</sup>a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.”

Mary’s Song of Praise: The Magnificat

**46** And Mary said,

<sup>y</sup>“My <sup>z</sup>soul <sup>a</sup>magnifies the Lord,

**47** <sup>b</sup>and my <sup>z</sup>spirit rejoices in <sup>c</sup>God my Savior,

**48** for <sup>d</sup>he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations <sup>e</sup>will call me blessed;

**49** for <sup>f</sup>he who is mighty <sup>g</sup>has done great things for me, and <sup>h</sup>holy is his name.

**50** And <sup>i</sup>his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

**51** <sup>j</sup>He has shown strength with his arm;

<sup>k</sup>he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

**52** <sup>j</sup>he has brought down the mighty from their thrones <sup>l</sup>and exalted those of humble estate;

**53** he has filled <sup>m</sup>the hungry with good things, and the rich <sup>n</sup>he has sent away empty.

**54** He has <sup>o</sup>helped <sup>p</sup>his servant Israel, <sup>q</sup>in remembrance of his mercy,

**55** <sup>r</sup>as he spoke to our fathers,

<sup>q</sup>to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”

This passage focuses on the virgin Mary just prior to the birth of Jesus. Most of us probably have images in our mind of the virgin Mary from artwork we've seen all through lives. We've seen the nativities with Joseph and Mary, kind and wise faces turned toward a remarkably mature infant. Or we've seen Christmas plays and movies with a lovely young woman cast as the virgin usually wearing old sheets repurposed as a biblical costume. Some might conjure up images of Mary taken from the many sculptures and paintings which feature her, usually with the same wise, knowing smile and mature features. We picture her calm, carrying the Lord, Joseph by her side, someone to be admired.

But the truth of Mary's situation is buried by our rush to the happy ending, the birth of Jesus. We tend to paint a much kinder, gentler picture than what history suggests. In Jewish custom, girls could be betrothed as young as 12, with the actual marriage taking place months or years later. Some apocryphal traditions suggest she was between 12 and 14 at the time she was betrothed to Joseph, but most Christian historians speculate she was closer to 14 or 16. In modern America she would, at best, be a sophomore in high school and just barely learning to drive. She would still be considered a child, unable, in our culture, to drink alcohol, make most of her own medical decisions, vote in elections, or handle most basic business affairs common to adulthood.

And then there was the matter of her pregnancy. Jewish tradition was that when the betrothal occurred the bride would remain in her parents home, the man would prepare his own home for her, and then many months or even a year later, the bride would be brought to his home. Yet the entire betrothal period was just as binding as a modern marriage. It was not as simple as simply deciding they wouldn't be married. To terminate the relationship a divorce would have to be pursued. Joseph would have been well aware that the child Mary was carrying was not his, meaning that Mary had committed adultery and Joseph was more than within his rights to divorce her if he chose. Furthermore, Mary could be stoned to death for committing the sin of

adultery. Her only defense? A story about an angel and a virgin conceiving.

Imagine for a moment a girl no more than sixteen years old. She is told by an angel that she will conceive the Messiah, so she knows that she is innocent, but she also knows that her entire world could very easily be brought down around her. At no more than sixteen, she faces divorce or death, and if she is left alive, she faces life as a single mother in a culture that is no where near as forgiving of such things as ours is. Can you imagine how she might have felt?

We like to say that she trusted in God, and that she knew things would turn out alright, and maybe she did. Maybe her faith was just that strong, that she never doubted, but mine isn't. I don't think she never doubted or felt afraid, not once. If father Abraham could doubt time and again after having talked with God's very own self, I imagine a teenaged girl with a message from an angel might doubt from time to time. I imagine she might have ben afraid. At the very least, even if she felt sure she might survive, she must have faced scorn from those around her.

Imagine her community. I'm sure they thought this messiah talk was nothing more than a creative excuse. They would've talked unpleasantly about her, maybe even to her. They would've talked about Joseph. They probably would've offered advice, to either have her stoned or divorced. Certainly, Mary would've lost the support of her friends, and potentially much of, if not all of her family. Even modern teen pregnancies tend to lead to isolation and bullying. How much more first century Israel in a culture deeply concerned about holiness and purity.

When we paint more realistic picture of Mary, it becomes obvious why she might pick up suddenly and flee to her cousin Elizabeth. It was much more than simply a friendly visit, it was a persecuted young girl seeking sanctuary with someone who might understand. Elizabeth is also carrying a miracle baby and had an encounter with God. If anyone on

the planet would understand, would be sympathetic, it would be her. A young, frightened girl was seeking acceptance, safety, love, even. She was seeking a home.

Elizabeth surely exceeds whatever hopes Mary might have had. Elizabeth does not simply stay quiet, or gently chide Mary for getting herself into such a predicament. No, Elizabeth greets Mary with love, openness and enthusiasm. She does not see Mary as simply a girl in trouble seeking shelter, but as a gift. “And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” Elizabeth believes God, believes Mary, and bosses Mary. She pours love and acceptance into Mary. She creates the sanctuary that Mary so desperately needs.

And because Elizabeth creates this sanctuary for Mary, one of the most beautiful songs humanity has ever known flows from Mary. “My <sup>z</sup>soul <sup>a</sup>magnifies the Lord, and my <sup>z</sup>spirit rejoices in <sup>c</sup>God my Savior.” This song does not come after Gabriel’s arrival. It does not flow when Mary is found to be with child. It is not sung to the many who do not believe her, who gossip about her. It is not even given to Joseph, her betrothed. It is sung in the sanctuary, the sacred space, that Elizabeth created for Mary. It is song that could only grow from love.

The need for sanctuary which Mary felt is familiar. It is common to all of us, at one time or another. When the storms of life rages against us, when we’ve messed things up, when the rug is pulled out from underneath us, we feel an ache for shelter, a place where we can take refuge.

That refuge can be found with God, and is a place we can share with each other. Elizabeth only knew how to provide such a space for Mary because she loved God and loved people, and allowed God’s redeeming love to flow through her. It was less about Elizabeth creating sanctuary than it was about sharing the sanctuary she knew she had with the Lord. The very Lord who Mary carried in her womb, who would later speak of his desire to be a sanctuary for his people, saying “How

often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.” God, who is always willing to welcome us home, no matter how we’ve strayed, no matter how big of a mess we’ve made, no matter how broken we are. God always yearns to gather us in God’s arms. And Elizabeth was able to allow God’s love to flow through her and create sanctuary for teenage girl with quite literally the weight of the world on her shoulders.

On this, the final week of advent, as the wait for the long-expected Messiah, grows short, we are once again reminded of the sanctuary we have in the Lord, the Lord that wants to hear of all our troubles, who loves us regardless of our sins, whose arms ache for us. All are welcome in God’s sanctuary, and I encourage you to seek God’s sanctuary no matter what your circumstances are, for you are welcome and loved there. I would also, however, encourage you to ask God how you might be a sanctuary for others.

Cultural expectations have greatly changed since Mary’s time, but how might we welcome a pregnant teenaged girl, alone and frightened? Would she find love or wrath? Would she find acceptance, not of her sins, but of her place as a treasured creation and child of God? Perhaps someone who is struggling with their faith, who is tired and beat down arrives at our doors one day. Would that person find sanctuary here? Maybe someone who has been running from God a long time crosses our path. Would that person be welcomed home? If we created such a space for these people, if we allowed God’s love to flow through us, what might flourish from them? What songs might they sing?

So often God, church and Christians are seen as the very last place one might find sanctuary. There is a strong, and sadly sometimes justified, perception that Christians will harshly judge the sinner, and sometimes, even the saint. I’ve witnessed that plenty of times. When I was a bright-eyed and bushy tailed seminarian working my first internship, a drug addicted couple found their way to the church on Sunday. They didn’t stay for long, it was clear hardly anyone wanted

them there anyway. That particular church did not provide them sanctuary. Another time my best friend, an atheist, was publicly shamed and questioned for not taking communion while attending my wedding. Christians were not a sanctuary for her that day. Many, many years before that a young woman left her physically abusive husband, and her parish essentially excommunicated her for it. She did not find, at least not then, the sanctuary she sought, and I wonder what might have flourished from my grandmother, if she had been held in loving arms.

Creating sanctuary does not mean we have to compromise our beliefs, and perhaps that's where some have gone wrong. Had Mary appeared before Elizabeth simply the perpetrator of an affair, I have no doubt that Elizabeth would have heartily disapproved of the sin, but I also have no doubt that the tone of Elizabeth's greeting would have been much the same, because all Elizabeth did was love God and love God's people, and that created a sanctuary for the mother of our Lord.

As we continue our ministry out in the world this week, may we love God and love God's people. As we prepare our hearts in expectation of the coming Christ, the ultimate sanctuary of our souls, I would invite you to consider how God might be calling you to be a sanctuary for others, and to ask God to lead you to God's hurting children, to any who are homesick for God's love. And if God should lead any of God's children to us, may we be a sanctuary for them, reflecting God's abundant love and grace to them, no matter how dire their circumstances or their history or personal demons might be. And when God's love is poured out, who knows what may flourish in that holy place?

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December 19, 2021