

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 9:7
SECOND LESSON: Luke 1: 26-44
December 8, 2024
SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

“How Can this Be?”

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This is a very unusual story, and not just because we are talking about virgin conceptions and miraculous late in life pregnancies. This story is unusual because the central players are both WOMEN. Aside from a few ancient Roman novellas, or romance novels, women’s stories were never told in the 1st century. And although I am confident that things have changed since I went to school, when I was a child one could be forgiven when reading history books for thinking that the entire species was male. Betsy Ross was the only women ever mentioned. People of color didn’t exist either. Textbooks contained battles, dates and presidents. All were highly sanitized, of course. The heroes were noble and wise. The history of enslaved peoples, the Trail of Tears and injustices against native peoples and Japanese internment camps during World War II were never mentioned. The Civil Rights movement was current events. That was ignored too!

Not only is this story about women, they were not rich and famous women either. They were poor. And at least one of these women defied convention and behaved in a way society would very much disapprove of. Mary takes off and travels on her own. Why did she do this? In a world where people lived side by side and everyone knew each other’s business, were people beginning to ask questions? She wouldn’t have been showing yet, but pregnancy has lots of side-effects like morning sickness. All we know is that for a young woman to travel alone was both unusual and risky. Women traveled with men, and pregnant women, particularly unwed pregnant women, stayed home. The men who wrote this story down did not ask these questions, so we remain ignorant of her experiences. We also know nothing of her journey, only that she arrived safely. We don’t hear about her father yelling or her mother crying, although they probably did. Mary was a real person from a real family.

Elizabeth was Mary’s aunt or second cousin. She was a good deal older than Mary. It’s understandable that Mary as the younger woman would defer to her older relative. It is not at all understandable that Elizabeth would in turn defer to Mary as the mother of her Lord! But when Elizabeth heard Mary’s voice the baby leaped in her womb. Last week we learned that John the Baptist would be filled with the Holy Spirit even before birth. This week we see evidence of that. But it is Elizabeth who prophecies, saying, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”

God chose these women, because they were strong and would mentor the children they raised to become the people God called them to be. A basic assumption underlying this story, however, is that women did not have inherent value in and of themselves. Their value was only found in relation to a man. They were the wife, daughter or mother of a man. The women themselves speak this way. And the story is told like this because in the 1st century that would be assumed. But we should never assume that these women only had value because they produced children. Elizabeth and Mary were remarkable people.

First century culture was based on what is technically called a shame/honor system. The source of all Latino macho ideas is the Roman Empire, which spread far beyond Italy to include what is now Spain and Portugal. We can also picture the reality Elizabeth and Mary experienced from the middle eastern perspective and consider what life is like right now for women in Afghanistan and Iran. Women in these worlds have no independent agency. In the same way in the 1st century the only way for a woman to achieve honor was through having children, particularly sons, within marriage. A woman who had a lot of sons, or an especially prominent son, was honored. There were no other career options. She wouldn't be recognized for being a great scholar or poet. She might get a little bit of credit among her peers if she handled the limited family budget well, but that was about it.

To throw the men a line, here, they suffered limitations too. They always had to look strong, and their job choices were constrained by birth. If your father was a fisherman, you were a fisherman. If your father was a carpenter, you were a carpenter. Trades were passed down through generations. You had to have money to be a scholar. Most people worked hard just to survive.

The shame factor for both Elizabeth and Mary was connected to childbirth. Elizabeth would have endured years being pitied and talked about. She would have been excluded from conversations around the well. They all talked about their children. She didn't belong. *There might even be something wrong with her. Maybe God was punishing her for a hidden sin.* Elizabeth was a lovely gracious faithful woman, and yet none of that mattered, because society determined that not having children was her fault. God had "closed" her womb. After she conceived John, Elizabeth even said, "The Lord has done this for me. In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people." Think about this for a moment! Simply not having children brought **disgrace** down on her head. What a burden to carry!

Mary conceived, but at altogether the wrong time. She and Joseph were not yet married. It's not that women didn't get pregnant before the wedding day. It did happen, but when it did the wedding was moved up in a hurry. In Scotland they used to say, "Chilly for June, isn't it?" when the baby was born in March. Mary was at risk because Joseph was not the father, and he could have rejected her. Yet that was not on her mind when she came to see Elizabeth. She had experienced a divine event. She carried a miraculously conceived child. How on earth could anyone explain that?

And where was Zechariah when this interaction is taking place? We don't know, but wherever he was he couldn't talk. We know from last week that the

angel Gabriel struck him mute because of his lack of faith. By way of contrast Mary had enormous faith. Elizabeth said, **“Blessed is she who believed.”** This kind of blessing is more than a state of happiness. It is vindication. Mary will be blessed because all will honor her name forever. She will not live in shame because the baby was conceived out of wedlock.

There are times when we all feel like failures. Some of us, like Elizabeth and Mary, have been the victim of bullying. I know my elementary school years were painful in the extreme. The fact that I can still remember the name of my worst 4th grade bully is telling. There are also times we have had the feeling of being on the outside looking in, like there is a party going on and we’re not invited. We feel like Elizabeth, excluded and snubbed. Some of us even suffer from what’s called “imposter syndrome.” We’re convinced we don’t *really* belong, even when in the eyes of everyone else we do. People afflicted with imposter syndrome think, *If people ever figure out who I really am, everyone will know that I shouldn’t be here.*

Elizabeth felt the reality of being on the outside looking in for years of her life. With each passing day, month and year and no child coming, the heads would shake more and more until finally few would even bother to speak to her. Mary’s condemnation would have come much more swiftly. She was pregnant but the marriage had not yet taken place. But both women were infinitely valued and loved by God. God chose these two women to be central players in salvation history, women who experienced shame and rejection. God knew their value, even when those in their communities did not.

God is not fooled by outward appearances as we are. We may think that we are not good enough, smart enough, pretty enough, strong enough or even thin enough, but God is not impressed by the things society considers important. Even in the birth of Jesus, God’s son, we see the wounded healed and the scorned vindicated. Jesus, the hope of the world, has come to reveal the truth. Amen.

Isaiah 9:7

⁷ Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.

He will reign on David’s throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.

Luke 1: 26-44

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee,²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

³⁴ “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

³⁵ The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail.”

³⁸ “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”