

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 9:7
SECOND LESSON: Luke 1: 26-44
December 5, 2021

“A Two Mom Moment”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Second graders have a lot insight into the nature of moms. When asked what mothers were made of one child said, “God makes mothers out of clouds and angel hair and everything nice in the world and one dab of mean.” As for why God made moms, well “she’s the only one in the house who knows where the scotch tape is.” How did God make mothers? “Magic plus super powers and a lot of stirring.” Why did God give you your mother and not some other mom?” Because “we’re related.” And here is one all mothers can relate to: What does your mom do in her spare time? “Mothers don’t do spare time.” And finally, if you could change one thing about your mom, what would it be? Answer, “I would like for her to get rid of those invisible eyes on the back of her head.” This one really strikes a chord with me because when my son Mark was four he went raking through my hair to find the eyes in the back of my head.

This two mom moment is a very unusual story, but not just because we are talking about virgin conceptions and miraculous late in life pregnancies. No, this story is unusual because the central players are both WOMEN. Women didn’t rate as historical figures back then. Aside from some Roman novellas which were the ancient version of romance novels, women were not written about at all. Even when I was growing up the history books were full of men. Aside from Betsy Ross, women apparently didn’t do anything. Of course, that’s not true, but textbooks were full of battles, dates and presidents. The history was written by men and about men.

Not only is this story about women, however, at least one of them is pretty independent. Mary takes off and travels on her own. Did she make this journey because people were beginning to talk? She wouldn’t have been showing yet, but pregnancy has lots of side-effects like morning sickness that in a small close-knit community would be obvious. There wasn’t much privacy. We don’t know. What we do know is that for a young woman to travel alone was both unusual and risky. Women traveled with men, not alone, and pregnant women, particularly unwed pregnant women, stayed home. We 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 prophesies, 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?”

Underlying the stories of both Elizabeth and Mary are the shame and honor realities of life in the 1st century. Women had no independent agency when it came to being honored, because 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. But as frustrating as these limitations were, ordinary men didn't always have it much better. 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, and Mary came from a family like this.

The shame factor for both Elizabeth and Mary was connected to childbirth. Elizabeth had spent years being pitied and talked about. She was excluded from the conversations around the well. She didn't belong. She was a lovely gracious faithful woman, and yet none of that mattered, because society determined that something must be wrong with her. 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 child within her that was not conceived in the usual way. How on earth could anyone explain that?

And where is Zechariah when this interaction is taking place? We don't know, but wherever he is he can't talk. The angel Gabriel struck him mute because of his lack of faith. By way of contrast Mary had enormous faith. Elizabeth says, “**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.

Mary was an unmarried pregnant woman, but when I say woman, we have to remember that she was probably only about 15. In terms of social status, she had none. Within society as a whole she barely counted as human. Within her own immediate community she could well have been the subject of cruel gossip. And we might expect Elizabeth to judge her too, but Elizabeth does not. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and welcomed her. And

Elizabeth of all people knew what public shaming felt like. She would be able to provide comfort and shelter. As an older infertile wife, she had endured a lifetime of being called a failure.

Do we ever feel like failures? Does life sometimes feel like we're on the outside looking in at a party to which we were not invited? Surprisingly most people feel like this at some point in their lives. Just try moving to a new neighborhood, school or job. And some people struggle at a deeper hidden level with what's called "imposter syndrome." They feel that they don't *really* belong, even when in the eyes of everyone else they do. No matter how gifted they might be, they feel like they snuck in under false pretenses, like a maid wearing the clothes of a princess, or a street person passing himself off as a professor. *If people ever figure out who I really am, they say, the game is up. Everyone will know that I shouldn't be here and I don't belong.* The irony is that imposter syndrome only happens to people who are gifted and intelligent, who do belong, but whose life experience has told them they have no worth. The sense of not belonging is a wound from the past.

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 no one 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 valuable 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 we compare our INSIDES to other people's OUTSIDES. We believe the images that people project are the real thing. **God knows the heart**, and God is not impressed by the things society considers important. In every part of God's salvation plan the healing of the wounded and the welcoming of the scorned is woven in. John the Baptist was born to a mother who suffered greatly prior to his birth. Jesus was born to a young mother who risked everything to say yes to God. Before Jesus was even born God was bringing those on the outside in. 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!"