

Hespeler, 20 December 2020 © Scott McAndless

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16, Luke 1:46-55, Romans 16:25-27, Luke 1:26-45

After the strange visitor had left her, Mary just sat there for a while. Her mind was reeling. How could it be that she, a nobody, a lowly woman from a small town, could possibly be described as being highly favoured? How could it possibly be said that the Lord was with the likes of her? Most of all, how could it be possible that she would be having a son?

Yes, she was young, but she was not an idiot. She knew how these things worked. She might be engaged, but she had barely even met Joseph. She had basically seen him from across the room while her parents and his had sorted out the whole matter that was to be between them. But that was it. Nothing else had happened. So how could what the stranger said be true?

Now, she had listened and nodded along as he had offered his explanation. What he had said had sounded completely crazy, but he said it with such authority and gravity that you couldn't help but look into his eyes and agree with him. And he had confessed that, yes, what he was talking about actually was impossible. His argument, basically, was that the impossible was possible. So she had agreed and she had bowed her head and taken on the mission he seemed to be giving her. But now she was troubled because it seemed as if it was one thing to agree with the words, but it was another to actually feel as if it were true with all her heart.

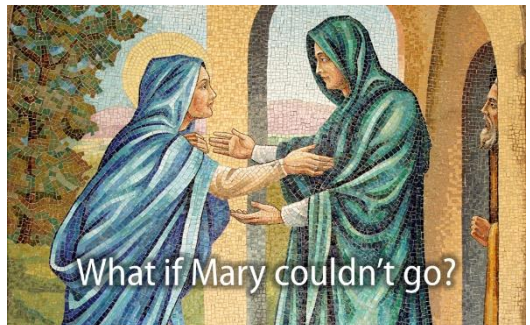
But wait, wasn't there something else that he had said? Hadn't he spoken about another impossible thing? Oh yes, it was about cousin Elizabeth – poor cousin Elizabeth who for so long had struggled with her inability to have a child. And yet he had stated the impossible as a fact: she was already six months pregnant! Suddenly Mary knew what she needed in order to make all of this surreal experience into something that seemed real. It was one thing to hear the word that Elizabeth was pregnant, but it would be something else to be with a joyful Elizabeth. She needed to see her for herself. But, unfortunately, it was 2020 which meant that nothing was as simple as it might usually be.

Skype call initiates on screen. Mary is calling Elizabeth and when she answers, we see them both on split screen.

Elizabeth: Hello? Oh, Mary, it's you! How sweet of you to call your old cousin.

Mary: I'm calling, Cousin Elizabeth, because I heard a rumour. Do you and cousin Zechariah have some news that you should share with the family?

Elizabeth: You've got me, Mary. I don't know how you



found out, but it's true. I'm expecting a baby!

Mary: Congratulations! I know that you and Zechariah have wanted this for so long! But you wouldn't believe what has happened to me.

Elizabeth: Actually, at this point, I think that I'd believe just about anything.

Mary: Okay, but this is all kind of thrown me for a loop. I can't even explain what happened. But somehow, I can't help but think that, if I could see you, if I could see the miracle growing in your belly, somehow that would make it all real. Maybe then it would make sense.

Elizabeth: Oh Mary dear, you know that Zechariah and I would love to have you come up here and visit. But I'm afraid that you just can't come. The covid numbers up here in the Judean hill country are just too high and the governor has ordered people not to even visit their close relatives. We have to be sensible and safe, even if such wonders are going on.

Mary: Yes, of course you are right. I guess I'll just have to sort through all of this on my own. But somehow, it seems, it is harder to live with miracles when you're alone. Okay, bye Elizabeth.

Elizabeth: Bye dear. Thanks for calling!

I have thought this year about that trip that the Gospel of Luke says that Mary took to the hill country after her visit from the angel Gabriel. It seems clear enough that the reason why she went had something to do with the angel's suggestion that the fact that her cousin Elizabeth was pregnant was a sign that nothing was impossible for God. Now, I don't think that this was because Mary didn't believe what the angel had told her about having a child. The story seems pretty clear that, by the time Gabriel had left, Mary had accepted the truth of what he was saying. So she wasn't seeking proof, but surely she was seeking something. She wasn't just going to throw a baby shower for her favourite cousin.

I think that Mary was understanding something that we often miss in our modern individualistic society. Our assumption is often that faith is an intently private thing. It is something between me and my God and it is really not anybody else's business. But that is a very impoverished understanding of faith, and it often reduces the question of faith to a matter of the things that we intellectually believe to be true or false.

But while faith may begin in the intellectual mind, it is actually something that only becomes a powerful world-changing force for good in community. And I believe that that is what actually drew Mary out to the hill country of Judea. Luke doesn't say anything about the relationship of Elizabeth and Mary other than that they were cousins, but there was clearly a deep bond between them. Mary didn't just need to see if what the angel had said was true, she needed Elizabeth to help her sort through it all and to make sense of it.

We read Mary's song this morning – the Magnificat – and what people often don't realize about this song is that it's not just the song of a young pregnant woman. It is a song that is rich in tradition and particularly in tradition

that has been handed down among women from generation to generation. Her song contains explicit echoes of the song of Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, of the story of the mother of Samson and even of the stories of the great matriarchs of the Jewish people, Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel.

These are obviously stories that she has heard, that have been told to her by older women like her cousin Elizabeth. These are the kinds of stories that women have told each other down through the centuries to help them make sense of the trials and tribulations of their lives, especially as they live in a world where they are so dominated by men.

It even makes me wonder whether, for some reason, Mary's mother was no longer in her life at that point and Elizabeth had become a mother figure for her. I certainly wouldn't be surprised if Elizabeth was that person who had passed women's wisdom and tradition down to her young cousin.

So, when Mary was given life-changing information by this visitor in the form of a man named Gabriel, she may have believed, but she still needed help to sort it all through and I expect that it is exactly that that compelled her to visit Elizabeth.

And think about that for a few minutes. If Mary, the one chosen by God, this special vessel uniquely used by God to bring about the wonder of the incarnation and given a clear and unambiguous explanation of the whole thing by a messenger from God, needed the help of family and of a long-standing tradition passed down through the generations to really make sense for herself of what was happening to her, how much more do you or I need that?

And, in fact, I think it is something that we all experience especially at Christmas time. At this point in our lives, if we are practicing Christians, we have all heard the Christmas story hundreds if not thousands of times. We know where the baby was laid. We know the song that the angels sang to the shepherds and it has become our prayer for peace on earth among people of good will. We know the gifts that the wise men brought and what they were seeking.

So why do we gather to celebrate? Do we really think that the preacher might give us information about the nativity that we have never heard before? I mean, I may try to give you a unique angle, but I know I'm unlikely to teach you something completely new. No, we gather because we know that information, facts and data are not enough. We know that we have to experience it all collectively to make it real.

And that is not just when we gather in churches, by the way, but also when we gather in other ways. I know when we gather with our extended families, we may not spend a lot of time discussing the deep meaning of the nativity together. (I mean, that may depend on your family, but I suspect most don't.)

But whether we talk about it or not, when we gather like that, we are living out the truths of the Christmas story – the truths of joy to the world, the truths of reconciliation with others who might see the world differently from us and the truths of unconditional love. We may think about such things in the quiet

moments around Christmas, but we can only truly understand them when we experience them in community.

And that is exactly what makes this Christmas so difficult. If Mary had gotten pregnant in 2020, she wouldn't have been able to travel to the Judean hill country to visit with Elizabeth. And so what are we supposed to do when we cannot gather like we traditionally would this year – not in the church, not with our extended families and friends. And what is Christmas without Mary's Song, without a deeper understanding of what it's all about that is cultivated in the community of two women who gathered together. I think there's a real danger that, though we hear the Christmas story yet again this year, it just doesn't get through to our hearts.

And what do we do about that? I know there are some out there who are saying that we should just ignore or violate the limitations on gatherings, that Christmas is too important and that we can't let them stop us from getting together. But I cannot agree with that. The limitations that have been put in place are there for the sake of the protection of the community and especially of the most vulnerable, which has more in common with the Christian gospel than anything else we could possibly do at this season. No, it is right that we should behave in an exemplary fashion as much as we can.

But I don't think that means that we must forgo the deeper experience of the Christmas truths. We are just going to have to be much more intentional this year, despite the limits, despite the need for physical distancing, to breach that distance as much as we can in other ways whether it be over the phone or over Zoom or with actions of compassion and care that can be shown over such distances.

The miracle of Christmas is real, and I'm not just talking about the miracle of a young virgin conceiving over two thousand years ago. I'm talking about the miracle that any one of us can experience this year. I'm talking about the miracle of hope in the midst of a time when there is too much despair. I'm talking about the miracle of life in the midst of too much death. And I'm talking about the miracle of light in the midst of the darkness of this world. I want to remind you that these miracles are all there for all of you and that all you really need to do is make a connection no matter what barriers might be there preventing it. I pray that you might know and experience these miracles this year.