

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Christmas Around the Community
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Jeremiah 29:1-7; Luke 1:5-20

Mary and Elizabeth's pregnancies are solidly linked because of who their sons would grow up to be. Elizabeth's son John would teach and prepare the world for the teachings of Mary's son, Jesus. Both women were thrilled to be pregnant, but the atmosphere that surrounded these two pregnancies were vastly different. Elizabeth and Zachariah had been waiting a long time for this child. They had prayed and begged God to send them this boy. With every month that went by without a pregnancy Elizabeth felt the weight of disgrace. That is how she describes her situation, she calls it the disgrace she has had to endure. For Zechariah to be a priest with a direct line to God and not be blessed with a child was deeply frustrating for him. So once Elizabeth knew she was pregnant joy filled their home. I can imagine her preparing for the baby. Of course, first she would have told everyone she knows the good news. She would have received hugs and had exciting conversations. At home Elizabeth probably made a corner into a nursery. She must have stockpiled essentials. All the good nesting instincts fulfilled.

Mary was not able to act on her nesting instincts. How could she plan for a baby when she was just starting to plan for a wedding? Instead of relief from her partner she has to wait for Joseph to decide if he will keep her around. When an unwed woman got pregnant there is no excitement or hugs. Mary probably got stares and whispers, people pointing and rolling their eyes. No nursery could be set up because Mary had no idea where she would be living.

Mary finally gets so uncomfortable with the atmosphere she is living in that she decides to go see Elizabeth. As she walks through Elizabeth's door the rain cloud over Mary's head is swept away by an enthusiastic greeting. "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! This amazing welcome is so refreshing it releases Mary to praise God with a song so incredible we have given it the name "The Magnificat." The love and joy Zachariah and Elizabeth exude is so comforting Mary stays for another three months.

Some of us who have family coming in for Christmas might not want to replicate Elizabeth and Zechariah's welcome. We are barely able to handle the weeklong visit let alone it stretching into three months. But we do want to be people who others find welcoming. We want to exude the Christmas spirit of peace, hope, joy, and love in this season. This story of Mary and Elizabeth is a prime example of why we want that kind of presence – it makes a difference. We all want to make a difference. We know it is our calling as God's family to bless the communities we live in, but the amount of need in our community is overwhelming.

I have a weakness for animal rescue videos. Essentially, they are all the same though. An animal is found in dire need of help. Rescuers step in to care for the animal. In the end the animal is clean, healthy, and running around like the happiest creature ever. In all these videos there is a moment where the tension of hope and fear is replaced with joy. It is the tipping point where the animal is more healed than hurt. Unfortunately for many of our community's hurts we have not reached the tipping point. I'm sorry to have to say it but we will not solve food insecurity in 2019. This will not be the year we end homelessness or get every rape victim justice. Even with all our efforts there are still children sleeping on floors and people who went hungry this Thanksgiving. That realization can be derailing. The thought that creeps into our minds asks, "why try if there will still be people hurting and in need?" Assessing everything that needs to be done can paralyze our will to help.

This feeling of inadequacy will do one of two things. For some of us it will cause us to work more, give more, push past our boundaries and drive ourselves into the ground, depleting all our resources for the sake of trying to fix the

problem. The little efforts slip out of focus as we strive to achieve a bigger impact. For others, seeing the massive amount of work our community needs will drive us into our homes and tell us to shutter the windows. If we can't make the world out there perfect, then let's disengage completely so we don't have to feel bad. This reaction convinces us that nothing we do will be worth the effort, we can only give \$5 or one hour, what use is that. If we can't fix the problem, then let's do nothing.

This week as I was watching animal rescue videos I saw one that intrigued me. It was about a pitbull who was found in bad shape. She needed bandages around her face and front legs and her whole upper body. She was so sweet even though she was in a lot of pain. The bandages needed to be changed regularly and one day the vet staff decided to cut little hearts out of her old bandages, which were pink, and stick them on top of the new blue bandages. It made the pitbull look like she was wearing a cute polka dot sweater and not half a body worth of bandages. When her foster mom took her home the reactions of the community changed significantly. Where before, people would see the dog and say from a distance, "Ooohhh, no! What happened? Poor puppy!" now they were greeting the dog with smiles and pets saying, "How cute!" Their emotional reaction changed the pitbull's whole demeanor. She perked up! The thing that most intrigued me in this video was that her tipping point came early on her healing journey. She was still very much in pain and in danger of regressing, yet, the reactions from the community were the thing that made the most difference. When the atmosphere changed from concern and fear to hope and joy the dog's healing also took a turn for the better. That is what Elizabeth does for Mary. Her own joy creates a space where Mary can truly heal and get ready for Jesus' birth. The minute Mary walks in the door and is greeted with Elizabeth's joy her healing begins.

This is the power of community. We all know people who walk into the room and change the atmosphere. Their presences is enough to change how others feel. Psychologist call this "affective presence." I think this is why so many non-Christians celebrate Christmas. The atmosphere around Christmas is contagious and everyone wants to be a part of the joy it creates. Some of us are Mary. We have been dealt something in life that has caused us to want to recoil from the world. We worry people won't understand our situation and will judge us. That we will be whispered about and pointed at. We may have even had these fears confirmed and had people speak poorly of us. Some of us are Elizabeth and we have had a hard go at it but find ourselves in this moment blessed beyond our imagining. The hard days have paid off and we are filled with joy.

When these two situations share community with one another God is able to work in and through both of them. It isn't a one-way street. Mary is healed by being in community with a joyful Elizabeth, but also remember how Elizabeth felt like a disgrace. Finally getting pregnant showed her God's blessing but the thing that fully healed her was being visited by Mary. When Mary greets Elizabeth, she feels deeply honored to have the mother of her Lord visit her. Her feeling of disgrace is completely healed. Neither of these women is doing anything extraordinary. They do what they can for one another. That's what a good community does.

This advent we will hear about the Christmas spirit inspiring grand shows of generosity and kindness in our community, but don't let them dominate your attention. Our community will also show the Christmas spirit by leaving snacks for delivery workers, letting someone cut in line, and giving a dog a pat on the head. These moments matter. We may not even feel like we have done anything. You may be the only person to smile at that cashier or the only car that will let someone into the lane they need to be in. Imagine what moments like these could mean if we all did them. And on our worst days how much nicer it would be to live in a community where kindness flowed so easily.

We all want to make a difference in our community. The grand gestures are wonderful, but in the pursuit of helping do not undervalue the simple kindnesses. And do not get discouraged when your invitation is not accepted or when your hospitality is not returned. Your efforts are worthy whether they are received or not, because when we are in community there is no telling where that ripple will travel.