

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“God’s Imperfect Family: Mary the Ezer”

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Luke 1:39-56; Matthew 1:1-6, 17

“One of these things is not like the other. One of these things doesn’t belong. Can you tell which of these things is not like this other by the time I finish this song?” How many of you can identify this song? Yes, it is from Sesame Street and helps children with the concepts of similarity and difference. I have to say that this is how I think about the four women in Jesus’ genealogy. Three are the same and one doesn’t belong. See if you can tell which one. Tamar, dresses like a Temple prostitute, sleeps with her father and has twins. Rahab, who is a Temple Prostitute, betrays her own people to save her family. Ruth, is a foreigner who ultimately scandalously offers herself to an older Israelite man. And finally, the blessed virgin Mary, who completely submits to the will of God to bring forth the messiah. How many of you would vote for Tamar? Rahab? Ruth? The blessed virgin Mary? Well if you voted for any of them you are wrong...because they are all the same. They are all ezers.

What is an ezer, you ask? To understand we must go back into the depths of the Old Testament. In fact, need to begin in Chapter 2 of Genesis, where God figures out that Adam can’t make it on his own and so creates for him, an ezer, who is named Eve. What is fascinating about this is that the term ezer is translated here as “helpmate”. The thought is that Adam needs someone to go around Eden picking up his leafy socks because he leaves them everywhere. This is fascinating to me because nowhere else in the Bible is ezer translated in that way. Instead, the term is translated as something like, strong deliverer or mighty warrior. It is a Hebrew military terms that is most often used to refer to God when God saves God’s own people. That’s right, in 16 of the 21 occurrences of this word, it describes God’s powerful saving work. It becomes clear that this term is not about being a helpmate, but about someone who rescues another amid danger. What I want to argue this morning is that all four of these women are ezers because they were all deliverers of their people.

Let’s begin. Tamar is the strong deliverer of her husband’s family. When her husband died before they had children, unless she acted it would be as if her husband never existed. So when justice is denied her and her husband, she acts powerfully and decisively to bring it about by sleeping with her Father-in-law, the one whom justice declares ought to father the child. Rahab understood clearly that the God of creation, the God who had led the people out of bondage in Egypt was stronger than her god, the god Jericho. So, when the Israelite spies arrive, in preparation for the attack on her hometown of Jericho, she risks her life to hide them in return for a promise to save not just her, but her entire family. She delivers then both the spies and her

family. Ruth is the strong helper and protector of her mother-in-law Naomi. Because Naomi had no husband or sons, there was no one to protect or provide for her. She was completely vulnerable. Ruth, steps into the void as her ezer, her strong deliverer and protects her to the end of her days. All of which brings us to Mary, the blessed virgin, who is an ezer for the world.

One of the unfortunate things about the church is how it has sanitized Mary and turned her into an almost other-worldly saint. Images of her always depict her in blue robes, with a white head covering and a halo. You can almost hear the angelic humming in the background as she glides across the birth and death scenes in the Gospels. These images do not do justice to the ezer that she was. Here's why. When Mary is approached by the angel on behalf of God, wondering if she would be willing to participate in this messiah birthing endeavor, Mary knows what this means. It means that the revolution has begun and that she is at the center of it. The revolution is the inbreaking of God's kingdom which will wipe away all other earthly kingdoms. Listen to her words from Luke, "*God has shown the strength of his arm (think ezer); he has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel...*" This is the revolution that will turn all things upside down and inside out. Mary is an ezer because she is willing to risk everything to bring forth the one who will deliver God's people.

All of us here this morning are called to be Ezers, which I realize can seem a bit overwhelming. It can be overwhelming because when we think of ezers we often think famous people in the Bible or of other famous people who do great things. We may think of people like Rosa Parks, or Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., or Gandhi, Harvey Milk, Mandela or Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. We see them as ezers who were "strong deliverers" of peoples and nations. They worked for justice on the macro-scale in a way most of us cannot. And this is why the stories of these four women matter. They show us that ezers also work on the micro-scale. They remind us that the only thing it takes to be an ezer is courage and a willingness to act for the right, even if it is only helping to deliver a single person. Remember that Tamar and Ruth acted as an ezer for individuals. Rahab worked as an ezer for her own family. Only Mary works as an ezer for the larger community. What this means is that when we teach a child to read in Pontiac or Detroit, we are being ezers who help to liberate them from poverty. When we feed children through shop and drop and our food pantry, we are being ezers who are liberating them from hunger. When we welcome all people into this place, we are being ezers of grace and love. You and I can be and are called to be ezers.

My challenge for each of us then this morning is for us to ask ourselves this question. For whom am I being an ezer? For whom am I being a strong deliverer or strong advocate? And if the answer is, I'm not sure, then simply ask, who around me needs an ezer and how can I be one for them?