

“Mary’s Journey”

Luke 1:26-55

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At the end of Mary’s song, the story of this first part of Mary’s journey concludes with verse 56: “And Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months and then returned to her home.”

Three months. That’s a pretty long visit. I kind of want to know more about that time. What did Mary and Elizabeth talk about? Did they share their fears about childbirth? Did they struggle to understand the unexpected turn both of their lives had taken, or the mysterious plans of God that they’d suddenly become part of? Did they wonder if they would know how to parent their sons who were not going to be “typical” children? Was Mary trying to figure out how to talk with Joseph about what the angel had told her?

Did they take long walks? Cook together? Make baby clothes? Was Elizabeth a wise and calming presence to the much-younger Mary? Did Mary’s younger energy provide help for Elizabeth who must have tired easily as her pregnancy went on?

We have to use our imagination because this is one of those frustrating places where the Bible gives us a wee bit of tantalizing detail, but just a wee bit, nothing more. We can’t be exactly sure why Mary decided to visit Elizabeth in the first place: Just to test out the accuracy of what the angel had told her? Did she have a sense, somehow, that by informing her of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, the angel was directing her to make the trip? Was she concerned about Elizabeth’s health and well-being, when she learned that Elizabeth was about to be an “older mother”? Did she already have a relationship with Elizabeth close enough that she’d naturally turn to her as someone she could count on for support and guidance? Or was it an instinctive need to seek out the only person who might understand what was happening to her?

We don’t know the answers to any of those questions. But we do get, from Luke’s telling, the sense that this was no casual visit made out of a sense of duty, but a time of great significance to both Elizabeth and Mary. Luke tells us that Mary hurried to get there as soon as she could. It was a trip of something like 90 miles – no small thing in those days – so it obviously seemed important to Mary, for her to make what would have been a pretty difficult journey, probably travelling as part of a caravan. When she arrives there is an immediate, personal, and mystical connection between the two of them right away. Elizabeth feels her baby move inside her, and she understands – we aren’t told how she knows – that Mary is carrying a child who will be the long-awaited Savior.

Last week in Adult Ed we looked at art depicting this scene, including one painting of the two figures of Elizabeth and Mary with a bright white space of light between them. Somebody commented, “it’s the presence of God,” which seems exactly the right way to understand that moment.

And that's the moment that prompts Mary's song. We read this (or sing it, as we did this morning) almost every Advent. Sometimes we read about the angel making the announcement to Mary, and then skip right ahead to Mary's song. Probably that's the reason I often unconsciously think of her song as a response to the angel's message. I have tended to forget that Mary's song doesn't come until *after* she's made that long 90 mile trip, until she is in the presence of Elizabeth, until Elizabeth puts into words her recognition of the new reality of both their lives. Maybe Mary needed the time of the journey to think about what it all meant. But it certainly seems as if there's something about being with Elizabeth that allows Mary's song to pour out.

Mary's very often portrayed as "meek and mild" (which probably has something to do with songwriters needing a word to rhyme with "child" ☺). She does seem acquiescent when she says to the angel, "Let it be with me according to God's word." But the words of her song are strong words. They're the words of someone who understands her life, her calling, in the larger context of God's desires for the world. There's nothing of Christmas-card sentimentality about what she says. She doesn't celebrate personal salvation or private spirituality or a holy life. She sings about God's desire for justice in the world. About the powerful being brought down and the lowly lifted up. The hungry being fed and the rich sent away begging. She understands the significance of God's messiah being born, not into the halls of power, but to a poor woman who is part of a struggling and oppressed community. She knows that what God is doing in her, in the child she's carrying, is offering a vision of a new and different world.

It's a huge thing. It's not just that Mary's expectations for her life have been upended and remade; it's that *all our expectations* for how things are supposed to work in the world are revised according to God's plan. There's an energy and awe to Mary's song as she puts this realization into words. It feels like her journey (and really, at this point, it's still just beginning) is ready to move forward purposefully and energetically. And then, there is this pause.

We usually read right past this little bit about Mary staying with Elizabeth for three months. For some reason, this year I found myself really focused on this part of the story - that pause. Our worship theme for the year, "resting in grace, walking in love" may have had something to do with that. Or maybe it's because I'm tired, like many of you are tired, from the stresses and worries and extra challenges and emotional tensions of the past 18-plus months. I started to wonder why Luke bothers to tell us this seemingly-insignificant detail. It seems almost as if Mary needs time away from her home and her usual routine - a retreat, you might say, perhaps to gather her strength for the rest of the journey. Perhaps she had to grieve the loss of the future she'd anticipated in order to accept the new role she was called to. Maybe she felt overwhelmed and needed time to reflect on what was happening. Maybe she needed space and quiet to pray. Perhaps she was afraid and needed someplace that felt like a refuge. It seems that Elizabeth's home provided whatever it was she was seeking: A pause in a journey that was sure to be emotional, unpredictable, demanding, rewarding, painful.

We usually read right past this bit, but maybe we shouldn't. Our tendency to get on with the story mirrors our tendency to get on with life. The next thing. The to-do list. Keeping busy so

we don't dwell on the things that worry us or make us sad. Distracting ourselves so we don't have to deal with our problems. Being "productive" or doing something "useful" because we've absorbed the idea that this is what makes us good and responsible people.

We need the pause.

We need the pause, because *our* journey is also long and unpredictable and challenging and emotional and sometimes painful. We need the pause, because rest is essential for our bodies, minds, and spirits. We need the pause that allows us to realize our weariness or anxiety, and to identify the source. We need the pause that lets us step outside of our routine to ask ourselves those bigger questions about what we are doing with our time, which is of course about what we are doing with our lives. We need the pause that gives us space and time to pray. We need the pause to remember that we are not in charge, that we are not self-sufficient, that we rely on God's grace. We need the pause to allow God to speak to us, and maybe redirect us. We need the pause to come to grips with changes that have happened in our lives, or with the fact that we *need to make* some changes. We need the pause to gather our courage for difficult things ahead. We need the pause because the work of justice and making a better world is long-term work, and not sustainable unless we replenish our strength and renew our hope. We need the pause that lets us carefully think before we respond with anger. We need the pause to consider what it is we truly need.

In this season that is busy for many of us, we need the pause that comes with lighting an Advent candle, really listening to the words of a carol, being grateful for a simple pleasure, expressing love to someone. We need the pause to remember the reasons we need a Savior, the vision of a different world Mary sang about, the call of God to *us* to join in the work of justice and peace. Like Mary, we need the pause, to be ready to welcome Jesus.