

Friends
Luke 1:39-45
Sermon by Dan Schrock
December 14, 2014
Advent 3

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb.

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

If something really wonderful happened to you, who is the first person you would want to share the news with? Suppose you were offered a new job in a better organization for more pay. Who would you call up first and tell the news to? Or suppose you won a lottery to have solar panels installed for free at your home. Who's the first person you'd tell? Or what if someone gave you a free trip to southern France? Who would you text immediately?

When something wonderful happened to Mary, the person she wanted to talk with was Elizabeth. Luke says Mary and Elizabeth were relatives (1.36), but however they may have been related, they were clearly friends.

Our story for today follows right after the story we focused on two weeks ago. In that story, Gabriel offered Mary the gift of a pregnancy and asked her to become one of God's missional partners in the life of the world. Quickly and willingly, Mary said yes, she'd be happy to do that, even though she had no way of knowing what the implications of that yes might turn out to be. The story infers that when Mary gave her consent to Gabriel and God, she immediately—or almost immediately—became pregnant.

What's the first thing Mary does after Gabriel leaves? She goes to visit her friend Elizabeth. The story says nothing about Mary sharing the news of her

pregnancy with her fiancé, Joseph. You'd think she might tell Joseph, of all people, what just happened to her. After all, Joseph was her intended husband, and this news of a pregnancy that he did not help to create definitely affected him. And remember: the story we heard last week about an angel visiting Joseph and soothing his troubled nerves about this unexpected pregnancy comes from the gospel of Matthew. Luke has no such story. As far as the gospel of Luke is concerned, Joseph doesn't know anything about Mary's pregnancy. So it's very interesting that Mary doesn't tell him that she's now pregnant. Maybe she did, but the point is Luke doesn't say she did. Moreover, Luke says nothing about Mary telling her parents, or her siblings (if she had siblings), or anyone at all in her home village of Nazareth. Luke implies that no in Nazareth knows Mary is pregnant.

Instead Luke says that the person Mary tells is Elizabeth. Now if you read the story carefully, and if you look at a map, you'll discover that Elizabeth lives far away. Mary is from Nazareth, a village in Galilee, which is located in the northern part of Palestine. Elizabeth, by contrast lives in down in the southern part of Palestine, in a region called Judea. Luke doesn't specify the village, but since her husband Zechariah is a priest who sometimes officiates in the Jerusalem temple, we can guess that Elizabeth and Zechariah live in a village close to Jerusalem. Look at any good map of 1st century Palestine, and you'll soon see that Mary's home village of Nazareth is at least 60 miles from Jerusalem.

For us 60 miles is nothing. We just hop in car and get there in an hour or two. For a short trip of 60 miles, we might not even take a lunch with us, much less a change of clothes. We'd just grab our keys and go.

But not Mary. Being a young peasant woman, she probably walked. It is said that the average person can walk 3 miles per hour on flat, easy ground. If Mary walked for 10 hours a day, then she could cover 30 miles in one day, which might

mean that she could get to Elizabeth's house in two determined days of walking. But the terrain in Palestine is neither flat nor easy, so I'm guessing this trip took Mary about 3-4 days.

That means Mary had to plan for this trip. She had to pack food and very likely extra clothes into some kind of bag or backpack. Maybe she took a walking stick. Luke says Mary "set out and went with haste." I imagine she quickly packed up her food and clothes, her pillow and bedroll, secreted away a few precious coins, grabbed her walking stick, and set out eagerly toward the south.

The sense of the story is that Mary is happy about all this. She acts rapidly, with eager anticipation. She looks forward to seeing Elizabeth, whom she likely hasn't seen in a long time, since a walking trip of 60 miles is not one you'd take every day when there's so much work to do around the house such as baking bread and mending clothes. Mary is really looking forward to this because Elizabeth is a dear friend.

You don't have to see each other very often in order to be friends. Earlier this year, the *Mirror*, a newspaper in the United Kingdom, published a story about two friends named Nona Avery and Alice Powers. One lives in England while the other lives in Ohio. Their friendship started way back in 1942, during World War II, when Alice from America put a personal notice in the *Girl's Crystal Annual*, a romantic fiction magazine for girls. The notice said that Alice was looking for a pen pal. When Nona read this ad over in England, she was immediately intrigued, sat down to write Alice a letter, and enclosed a black-and-white photo of herself. As soon as Alice received Nona's letter, she replied, and thus began a life-long friendship. At the time both girls were only 12 years old, but they've been at it now for 72 years, and at age 84, they still write to each other. So far each of them has written more than 1,000 letters. The remarkable part of their

friendship is that they've only seen each other twice. In 1987, 45 years after they started writing to each other, Alice saved up enough money to finally visit Nona in England. Four years later, in 1991, Nona returned the favor by flying to Columbus, Ohio, and visiting Alice. But those were the only two times they met. The rest of their contact as friends has been entirely through hand-written letters, mailed once every two weeks.¹

Like Nona and Alice, Mary and Elizabeth may not have visited each other very often in the course of their lives. Sixty miles by foot is a long way, and while men in the 1st century may have made such trips regularly, it was unusual, and probably also dangerous, for a single woman to make such a trip. This could easily have been something of a once-in-a-lifetime trip.

In any case, Mary finally arrives after 3-4 days, her heart beating rapidly, her mind imagining what it will be like to see Elizabeth again. Finally she arrives. They hug. They kiss. They laugh with glee. They look fondly into each other's eyes.

This was a long visit, not a short one. According to Luke, Mary stayed with Elizabeth for 3 months (1:56). On the surface of it, you might think that they wouldn't have much to talk about during those 3 months because of the significant differences between them. For one thing, Elizabeth had been married to Zechariah for a long time. She was intimately acquainted with the realities of marriage, its ups and downs, its ceaseless dance of intimacy, its disappointments and joys. Mary, by contrast, knew none of these realities because she was only betrothed and not yet married.

Another difference is that they belonged to different generations. Mary was young, probably still a teenager, while Elizabeth was an aging woman—"getting on

¹ Joe Mellor, "Penpals for 72 Years Still Corresponding by Hand-Written Letter Every Two Weeks," *Mirror*, March 10, 2014, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/real-life-stories/penpals-72-years-amazing-story-3227704>, accessed 10/15/2014.

in years,” as Luke delicately puts it (1.7). We don’t know how old Elizabeth was, but if she was in her early 40s, and if Mary was around 12-15 years old, then they were separated by a span of about 25-30 years.

Even so, they are one of the Bible’s greatest examples of intergenerational friendships. In truth, the two women had a lot in common. For one thing they were related, though as you know, being related does not always make for good relationships. Still, they knew many of the same people, and in the privacy of Elizabeth’s house they could tell each other lots of stories about Uncle James and cousin Salome and all the other members of their extended families.

But what really brought them together was their shared, present joy of being pregnant. Mary was newly pregnant, still at the beginning of her first trimester, while Elizabeth was now 6 months pregnant, at the beginning of her third trimester. During their 3 months together, I’m sure they spent lots of time talking about their respective pregnancies. As the months went by, Elizabeth helped Mary get through her periods of morning sickness, while Mary helped Elizabeth with housework and the many preparations you have to do for a first baby.

However, I think even that is not what really united them in friendship. I think what really knit their minds, souls, and hearts together was their common calling to participate in God’s mission. God gave each woman a child to birth and to raise. To Elizabeth, God gave a child later to be called John the Baptizer, who was cast in the mold of a fiery Old Testament prophet and who would motivate people to repentance. To Mary, God gave a child who would alter the course of the world. In this common calling was the true foundation of their friendship. It was not having similar personalities or a shared hobby that drew them together, but a joint missional calling. They became friends because they worked together in the same mission.

That shared mission is what blessed them. *The mission blessed them!* God blessed their wombs. God blessed their bodies. God blessed their spirits. God blessed their friendship. And in turn they became a blessing to the rest of the world.