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Luke 1:39-56; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12
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We Can't Go Alone

In 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General issued a report highlighting the alarming crisis of loneliness and social isolation in our society. The findings paint a troubling picture: the lack of social connection can have grave consequences on our health, equating to the risks associated with smoking up to 15 cigarettes daily. With nearly half of U.S. adults reporting feelings of loneliness, particularly among young adults, it's evident that many are suffering in silence. The pervasive nature of social media used excessively further contributes to feelings of isolation. These factors not only affect individual well-being but also erode the fabric of our community.

Our scripture today provides us a poignant example of choosing connection when faced with challenging circumstances. In Luke, we witness Mary's courageous decision to seek out her cousin Elizabeth after learning she was pregnant. Rather than retreating into isolation, Mary recognized her need for support and encouragement which beautifully models how God desires community for us and how, through relationships, we can find solace and strength.

Join me as we read from Luke 1:39-56

Luke 1:39-56

39 At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, **40** where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. **41** When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. **42** In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! **43** But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? **44** As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. **45** Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

46 And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.

50 His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful

55 to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.”

56 Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Please join me in prayer as we ask for God’s illumination on these scriptures today.

There are a couple of things that struck me in these scriptures that I would like to lift up today. We see that despite Mary’s circumstance, she chooses not to go alone. Instead, we see how her connection with Elizabeth was crucial in providing just what she needed at that time. We also see how God chooses to be in community within God’s self. And finally, we see how God sent his Son to us, so that we would not have to go alone.

Unfortunately, we live in a world that often stigmatizes certain groups, especially teenage parents. An article from *Psychology Today* mentions that these individuals are subjected to various stereotypes and judgments, causing them to feel further isolated during a time when they should be supported.¹ Instead of casting judgment, we in the Church need to embody compassion, offering support to those in need. Like Elizabeth, our response should always be inviting and affirming.

When the weight of loneliness makes us feel forgotten and we wonder if our place in this world matters, it's easy to get sucked into a cascade of lies. Perhaps that is why in our scripture story today, teenaged Mary left home immediately upon learning she was pregnant to be surrounded by those who would not shame her but

¹ Jean Wittenburg, “Teen Mothers: When Stigma Trumps Compassion (And Research)” posted on *Psychology Today Website* on January 18, 2023.

model a right, Godly, behavior. Enter Elizabeth, Zechariah the priest's wife and Mary's cousin, who lived in the hill country of Judea.

The scripture tells us that Mary got ready and hurried to visit Elizabeth. Surely news of Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy beyond her childbearing years spread throughout the country side. What was also well known about Elizabeth was that she was considered upright in the sight of God, observing all of the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.

The Greek word for "upright" comes from the root dikaios. It means innocent, holy, just, or righteous. In other words, when it came to doing the right thing before God, Elizabeth would have been known to treat Mary with blessing and honor, not shame and disgrace.

Notice how Elizabeth's encounter with Mary and her unborn baby was a full body experience. The baby in her own womb, leaped for joy, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. As we learned last week, Mary's arrival was a blessing, not a burden. Imagine, folks, if we approached these kinds of circumstances as Elizabeth did in our own lives. Pregnancies and babies are blessings, not burdens.

Notice also that Mary doesn't communicate anything to Elizabeth about her own pregnancy. Elizabeth was in her sixth month. She was clearly showing. But Mary, her miraculous conception had just happened. And yet Elizabeth just knows, but how?

The Holy Spirit in her. The Holy Spirit often communicates with us in ways that are mysterious. Through scriptures we've read. Or people who speak to us. Or thoughts or ideas that just pop into our heads. Or life circumstances. Or a peace that transcends understanding.

The Apostle Paul also talks about how the Holy Spirit even intercedes for us in prayer when we do not know what we ought to pray for...but uses wordless groans.²

And so through the power of the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth just knows what was going on in Mary's life and who was behind it. This was a God thing that needed to be embraced and brought into the light. Not something that needed to be cast off to the shadows.

Elizabeth even calls Mary "blessed."

The Greek word for blessed comes from the root word Makarios. It means fortunate, well off, supremely blessed. Quite a change in perspective for a young girl, from Nazareth, where nothing good, important, or rich was expected.³

² Romans 8:26-28

³ John 1:46. This was remarked of Jesus by Nathaniel when Philipp told him that they had found the Messiah who was from Nazareth. It shows the low view that was commonly held for people from Nazareth.

This was exactly what Mary needed. At a time when Mary could have been stoned to death by her community for having sexual relations outside her marriage with Joseph. She found comfort, connection, and encouragement from someone.

What are we needing this Christmas season? What if we chose to seek it from community and not ourselves? How might that bless us?

Mary chose not to go alone. And she was blessed.

And we see how this gives birth to a song of praise in Mary, like Hannah, in the Old Testament. God was doing something in her and through her that she could rejoice about. Something that connected her to God's plan for all of creation where everything that was wrong in the world would be made right.

Redistributing power and wealth so that those who have a lot don't have too much, and those who don't have any would have enough.

In other words, bringing God's kingdom to earth, as it was in heaven.

All of which should be exhibited within God centered community, like the church.

And let's not overlook the divine aspect of community. God, in His triune nature, models community within Himself—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They exist in perfect unity and relationship. If God Himself embodies this principle of community, we, too, should strive to cultivate bonds that reflect His love. When we isolate ourselves from this dynamic, we miss out on the blessings and strength that come from being part of a faith community. If its good for God, then it certainly must be good for us too.

And yet I hear so many Christians these days who choose to do life and faith on their own, apart from the Church. I'm sure there are many reasons, but folks it's not good to be alone.

As the wisdom writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us.

“Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:

10 If either of them falls down,
one can help the other up.

But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them up.

11 Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?

12 Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.

A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”⁴

⁴ Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Folks, we are better together than we are on our own. We can love and support one another. We can celebrate when things go well. And we can lift each other up when we fall.

Notice how the scripture talks about how two are better than one. Two can keep each other warm. Two can defend themselves. But at the end it says “a cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”

Who or what is the third strand, that when woven between two people creates a rope so strong that it could not be quickly broken?

Jesus Christ.

My friends, when Jesus gets woven into the mix of a community like a Church that is genuinely trying to reflect the self-giving love of God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit, then it is not quickly broken.

But community isn't merely about gathering; it's about forging deep relationships that embrace the messiness of life. It's about being there for one another, not just in moments of joy but also in sorrow. The call for us is to be like Elizabeth—extend love and understanding, and create spaces where people feel seen, heard, and valued.

I'm not saying that Christian community is perfect. It's not. We are not. We are made up of flawed human beings. And if you hang around us long enough, you'll experience that. But when we stop participating in the life of a church because of it's messy, it could be that we are worshiping an idol and not the God who calls us to gather.

What would it look like to foster deep connections in this season—not just gatherings marked by exchanging pleasantries but by sharing your messy, holy, complicated life?

As we navigate the complexities of our own lives, let us remember the significance of what God did when He sent Jesus into the world. In the most humble of circumstances, He chose to be born to an unwed teenage girl, demonstrating that He is present with us in every aspect of life. Through Jesus, we find the assurance that we do not journey alone; we belong to God and to each other.

So, as we journey through this Advent season, let us lean into community. May we be a source of support and encouragement to those around us, embracing the promise that we are never truly alone. Together, may we navigate the winding paths of life, reflecting the love of the One who came to dwell among us—Emmanuel, God with us.

May the warmth of companionship chase away feelings of isolation, and may the Holy Spirit empower us to build a community rooted in compassion and

understanding. Let us be vessels of love, creating a quilt of connection that covers and comforts, even amidst uncertainty.

Breathe prayer:

Inhale: Light in the darkness,

Exhale: Guide our paths together.