

WHAT LOVE DOES

Luke 1:39-55

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A young unmarried woman learns that she is pregnant. And, at the same time, she learns that her relative Elizabeth is pregnant. After Mary says, “yes” to the angel, she hurries to the town of Ein Karem, where Elizabeth lives. Mary lives in the region of Galilee; Elizabeth lives in Judea, near Jerusalem. It is a distance of some 90 miles.

We talk, on Christmas Eve, about Mary and Joseph making the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, also a trip of between 70 and 90 miles - depending on the route, and how arduous it would have been for a woman nine months’ pregnant.

Today’s story is less familiar - especially this detail. We don’t know why Mary left home. Was she embarrassed to be pregnant? Did she and Joseph decide it would be better to put a little distance between them for a while? Were her parents angry with her? Were there too many rumors, too much gossip? It’s a mystery.

But our first verse for today reads, “In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country.”

How did she possibly get to a little town outside Jerusalem? A young, pregnant girl from a poor family? Who traveled with her? Why does the text say that she went “with haste”? Why was she in so much of a hurry? Another mystery.

Once there, she is warmly greeted by her relative Elizabeth, and by the child in Elizabeth’s womb whom - Luke tells us - leaps! How does a baby - in utero - leap?

In our world today, people seem to live on the extremes - there are few people in the middle. When it comes to the birth story, people seem to gravitate to one extreme or another. They either think they have to believe it, as it’s written, and find logical, rational explanations for it all - or they dismiss it all. It’s that way not just with the birth story, but with all of the Bible, and with religious experience. As if there are only those two choices. Believe it happened, literally, or throw it all away as anachronistic, no longer meaningful.

But there is a third option, a middle option, that is best described for me in these wise words. One student of the Bible says, “I don’t know if all really happened exactly as the Bible says, but I know, for certain, that it’s true.” In other words, the birth story is a story that contains some deep truths about human life and about the character of God and about the

historical person of Jesus. It's not a story that always makes sense if you look at a map and a calendar, and when you try to reconcile Matthew's story with Luke's. But what if we read this story and look for the ways in which it enriches and deepens our lives, and our relationship with God?

What if - instead of trying to solve the mystery of how virgins become pregnant and how poor young women travel 90 miles, hurriedly - what if we give thanks to God for creating a world where there are mysteries that give meaning to life, that deepen our human experience?

Today we light the candle of love. Can you explain, with only rational, scientific, logical language, why it is you fell in love with your most favorite person? Or why you love Mozart, or the Beatles? Or why you love deep-dish pizza?

How boring would life be without mystery? If we just explained everything away?

Mary and Elizabeth spend time together, two women who are unexpectedly pregnant. It is a lovely personal moment - imagine the way they would have supported one another.

Luke wants us to know that these two women have a bond, and that - more importantly - the children they are carrying have a bond. John the Baptist is the first to recognize the significance of the child in Mary's

womb...he leaps for joy. Feeling that happen within her body, Elizabeth knows, too. And says to Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." These two women spend time together. Mary begins to think about what her life will be like. She will be the mother of this most special child. And she will also be a woman who needs the support of other women.

Every human birth is somewhat of a sacred mystery. In our family, we are awaiting the birth of my husband's first grandchild - he is due to be born at the end of this month, so birth is on our minds. My daughter was born December 29. It was a planned C-section. I went to Fairview Hospital for pre-admission testing on December 23, and on December 24 I put on my maternity clergy robe and was part of worship at two services at Lakewood Congregational Church. There are two large chairs at the front of that sanctuary where the ministers sit. I always thought of them as throne-like; they felt huge to me. They face the congregation, and the congregation, of course, faces the ministers. The senior minister was preaching. As he talked about the birth of Jesus, I sat there, with my hospital bracelet already on, and felt my daughter. She wasn't leaping, but it did feel as if she had about twenty fingers and toes finding the crevices between my ribs.

Love comes to us in mystery.

Sometimes love leaps, and then, our passage for today tells us - then, love sings. Luke gives her, and us, this song called the Magnificat...a song that describes God's job description for Jesus. Jesus will fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty. Jesus will bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly. Some people call this a song about turning the world upside down...but really, if you remember anything about the way God intends the world to be - as described in the Hebrew scriptures - what Jesus is here to do is to turn the world right side up again.

What God intends is for strangers and refugees and immigrants to encounter extravagant welcomes, for widows and orphans to be given homes and food and hope, for justice to be a given, for generosity to overflow abundantly.

It's that kind of life and that kind of world that God calls Israel to model for everyone - the Ten Commandments spell out a framework that would result in harmony and peace. But just giving the law wasn't enough - people still resorted to selfishness and violence. So God sends prophets - messengers to remind the community, in some pretty startling ways - that the people of Israel are falling away from their end of the covenant bargain.

“Return to me,” God says, “Return to the ways of love and justice...it’s a way of life that brings meaning and joy. Why don’t you believe me, why don’t you trust me, why don’t you give it a try?”

But people ignored the prophets. So God tries something else. And this is one way to look at the mystery of the birth story - the incarnation - God says, “What if I come to earth as one of you and show you what love looks like in person?” Jesus comes to turn the world right side up, the way God intends it to be.

To all people who long for justice, this song is good news. To all who long for more love and more mystery, life with richness and depth, this song sounds like good news. But especially to people for whom this life is difficult and disappointing, Mary’s song sounds like good news. Let’s hear it again through this video: <https://www.worshipousemedia.com/mini-movies/42068/magnificat>

Let us pray.