



Sermon for 12/23/18

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Good Morning!

Are you ready for Christmas? Who has their Christmas list done? C'mon - don't be shy - show me those hands! How about your Christmas cards? All addressed, stamped and on their way? Wrapping? All done? C'mon - I want to see those hands! Okay, here's my last question - who needs more scotch tape?

For the last two months, we have been inundated with Christmas commercials, magazine, newspaper and pop-up internet advertisements, Christmas decorations, children's wish lists, wrapping paper and maxed out credit cards. And every year, we moan about how the true meaning of Christmas gets lost in the shuffle and how Santa Claus and his eight reindeer get all the glory!

Another very important story often gets overlooked this time of the year as well. Today's Gospel reading described the meeting of Mary, a young woman, pregnant with her first baby, and Elizabeth, an older woman, also pregnant with her first child but at an age far advanced past the normal childbearing years.

I am the oldest of five girls. My mom is the middle child in her family, with an older sister and younger brother. My dad is the middle child in his family, with an older and much younger brother.

Back in the 50's, my mom was pregnant with my sister, Cindy, in Wisconsin and her sister was pregnant with her first child, Jimmy, in Seattle. Had they been born in the same time zone, the two cousins would have had the same birthday.

Fast forward about 25 years and we find my dad's younger brother and his wife are expecting a bonus baby girl in Vermont, my dad's older brother was expecting his first granddaughter in New Jersey and my husband and I were expecting our second child - a boy. Much to my grandmother's delight, the three babies were born within a month of each other. And *nobody* loved babies like Nana!

Big families like mine often do end up with first cousins, second or even third cousins with birthdays clumping up in groups. Our gospel for today tells the story about two female cousins who were both pregnant with their first sons at the same time.

The unique part of the story is that both of these births had been foretold in the Old Testament and both pregnancies were announced to the mothers-to-be by the same angel, Gabriel!

Although both of these women had been blessed with these gifts from God, they were made outcasts in society because of their circumstances. In Elizabeth's case, women who were unable to bear children were looked down on, teased and accused of not doing their "wifely duty" to their husband.

When Luke begins his narrative, Mary was in her third month of pregnancy and had fled to her cousin's home. Her family was struggling with the shock of her pre-marital pregnancy and were dealing with the reactions of their neighbors and local religious leaders. In those days, single pregnant mothers were often stoned and killed rather than allowed to carry their babies to term. Mary, knowing exactly who it was that she carried in her womb, needed to get out of town – fast!

Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, were described as "getting on in years". They had always been faithful followers of God's teachings. Even though her inability to conceive a child was seen as a disgrace in her society or a punishment for something she must have done in years past, she never became bitter or questioned God. She had enormous faith in God and His plans for her and her husband.

Elizabeth was not the only woman of God who was granted a child late in life - the Bible cites at least three other women who were similarly blessed.

The story of Abraham and Sarah is found in Genesis 18. Despite their reservations about their child bearing abilities, Abraham and Sarah were gifted with a son, Isaac. According to the Bible, Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born!

In Chapter 25 of Genesis, we read about Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac was 40 years old when they were married but Rebekah was barren. They prayed to God to give them a child and He gave them twins, Esau and Jacob.

The first chapter in the first book of Samuel described the events prior to his conception. His father, Elkanah, had two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. Peninnah was very fertile and bore her husband several sons and daughters. Hannah was barren and Peninnah constantly teased and berated her for not doing her duty and bearing their husband children. Hannah was so upset that she made a vow to the Lord promising Him that if she was able to bear a son, she would give him up to the Lord's service. After Hannah bore her son, she named him Samuel and, once he was weaned, took him to the Lord of Hosts in Shiloh and gave him to them for a life of service to the Lord, as she promised.

Now, back to Zechariah and Elizabeth...

While Zechariah was lighting the incense in the temple, he was overwhelmed by the presence of Gabriel and the angel's news of Elizabeth's upcoming pregnancy. At their age, what was God thinking? They were old – probably in their mid-60's – that's right – right around my age! When Don and I became parents again ten years ago, God *handed* us our two semi-grown grandchildren to raise! Jayson was six and Ashley was nine, so thank goodness, I didn't have to go through two more pregnancies and then years of diapers, potty training, etc! I cannot imagine the shock that Elizabeth must have experienced when she discovered this miracle growing in her belly!

Then, when Zechariah challenged Gabriel and dared to question the angel about God's plans for them, he was struck mute until after the baby was born and named John by him, as Gabriel had instructed.

One of the lines in today's scripture illustrates how important this meeting between these two women and their unborn sons was when Elizabeth said to Mary,

“For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. “

She went on to say,

“And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

I found this wonderful picture on Facebook last month. It is included in your bulletins as an insert. If you look closely at the painting, you can see the baby boys in their mothers' bellies and the look of wonderment and joy on both of the mothers' faces!

This acknowledgment of their blessings from God united these two woman like no other two people on earth. In the history of the Bible, no other woman had ever been singled out by God to carry any of His most holy prophets - especially at the same time.

It's like that old adage – “If you want to make God laugh, makes plans”! God is always full of surprises. Sometimes, when we least expect it, He touches us with a miracle and our lives are changed forever! Henri Nouwen, a priest and professor of Psychology wrote, “Waiting, then, is not passive. It involves nurturing the moment, as a mother nurtures the child that is growing in her. Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary were very present to the moment. That is why they could hear the angel. They were alert, attentive to the voice that spoke to them and said, “Don't be afraid. Something is happening to you. Pay attention.”

We have all been touched by the cloud of witnesses that are our ancestors. May we be as patient as Job, loyal as Ruth, faithful as Elizabeth and loving as Mary.