

Did you know that the Christmas story about the angels, shepherds and wise men is a small part of the Gospel Story? Did you know that it only shows up in Luke, in Chapter 2? Today we hear more of what happened beforehand, in Luke Chapter One!

Did you know that the Catholic “Hail Mary” prayer comes from this reading of Luke Chapter 1? In what is called the Annunciation, Gabriel said: “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you”.... And in what is called the Visitation, the Holy Spirit through her cousin Elizabeth said to Mary: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” And Mary’s response has become known as The Magnificat (My soul “magnifies” the Lord) which has been put to many musical settings.

All this is to say that Mary, sometimes called “Mother of God” was very devout and prayerful. Her cousin Elizabeth was also very devout and prayerful, actually part of a priestly family. They both heard messages from beyond, from the angel Gabriel, and from God’s Holy Spirit.

Protestants have often neglected stories about Mary due to a fear of idolatry; some mischaracterize Catholics as “worshipping” Mary. I’ve come to understand they are “venerating” her, seeing and relating to her as beautiful saint and mother of our Lord. YET..... from the the beginning of Luke, from the story of Mary and Elizabeth, we get another important lesson... that Mary, *like Jesus*, was also very human. The Grace of God comes to us often in human form, in the realities of our earthly life. Simply put, The Love of God deepens and is realized in community, in friendship!

We know that one of the deepest experiences of God is coming to the realization that we are loved and that the world has plenty of love for us! With all due respect to solitude and experiencing God in solitary prayer or meditation, most of our life is

spent learning how to give and receive love in community, with friends and with family! So on the one hand, we can see Mary as saintly, full of the Spirit, but also we can imagine the human aspect of Mary... that she would have had real concerns, even anxiety, about pregnancy, giving birth, and also about the angelic message that her child to be born “would be called holy, the Son of God.”

What does Mary do? Well, the angel also alerted her that her cousin Elizabeth, had amazingly conceived in her old age, and was already 6 months pregnant. Who better to discuss pregnancy with than another woman going through a similar experience? So Mary packs her bags, bids Joseph farewell, and goes to stay with Elizabeth. When Mary enters the house, we hear that the 6 month babe in Elizabeth’s womb (John the Baptist) started “leaping for joy” (we might say “kicking strongly!”) Wonderful stories of a mystical connection between these holy humans, their holy infants, an energetic connection, a spirit to spirit connection!

But again, there is the human side... imagine the conversations Mary must have had with Joseph before leaving to be with her cousin. Imagine the conversations Elizabeth must have had with her priest husband, who at first didn’t fully believe the promises that they would have a holy son to be called John. Imagine the conversations that Mary and Elizabeth must have had: “What? A visit from an angel? Saying my child will be a great spiritual leader?”

One Christian singer put this Bible story to music in a very creative way, emphasizing the human aspect of Mary and Elizabeth, their need for camaraderie, for community. We of faith need other people of faith who can help us deepen our own faith by sharing perspectives and experiences. We all need to be with a friend who is a good listener, who loves us by listening well. We need support

groups or friendship groups with people that have similar interests; or sometimes the *same gender*! I'll now sing this song, that reflects such friendship, called "I'll Go Tell Elizabeth," by Ken Medema.

*So many things are happening to me that I don't understand.
Visions and angels, a baby named Jesus; is not what I planned.
Plans I have made I like birds nests blown down by the wind in the
rain, and I am scattered like straw; I can't quite tell where to find
saneness again. I'll go tell Elizabeth. She'll understand. I'll go tell
Elizabeth. She'll hold my hand; she'll understand.*

*Go talk to Joseph, well I've talked to Joseph, and Joseph's a
man. So many things a woman can know that a man never can.
Joseph is practical, Joseph is worried by things of his own. And
talking with Joseph is sometimes no better than being alone. I'll go
tell Elizabeth. She'll understand. I'll go tell Elizabeth. She'll hold my
hand.*

*Sometimes I wish I could wake to discover it all was a dream. I
ought to be shouting for joy but I'm coming apart at the seams.
Mostly I am quiet, I keep things inside me, that's how I get by.
There's too much to handle, I need someone near me to share a
good cry.*

*So many things are happening to me that she'll understand.
Now that she's pregnant her life isn't going exactly as planned.
Plans that are made are like birds nests blown down by the wind
and the rain. She's scattered like straw, she can't quite tell where to
find saneness again. So I am coming Elizabeth. I'll understand. I'm
coming Elizabeth - I'll hold your hand, I'll understand.*

Let's not go through Christmas alone, and let's not let anyone else spend Christmas alone. Even a short phone call may be enough to brighten someone's day! Mary and Elizabeth model for us a deepening faith and trust in God, as they companion one another in their common needs and rejoice together in their heavenly promises. Let's follow their model, increasing our faith, in relationship with others, and listening to heavenly music that points us to the child in Bethlehem. Amen.