

“ROOM IN RELATIONSHIPS”
A Sermon Preached at
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(transcribed from audio file)

Today’s gospel is from Luke 1:24-45. Open our hearts to God’s Word.

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, “This is what the Lord has done for me in this time, when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

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

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

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Any of you ever had something that you're just like a little embarrassed about? Maybe even ashamed? For those of you who are having trouble thinking of something, just remember Junior High. Back in Junior High you were surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses that were ready to tell you exactly what was wrong with you. By the way you were shaped. By the way you were made. Something unique about you. Junior High kids have a gift for this.

For me, I had dry skin when I was growing up and so on my arms, but also on my legs I would get these little red dots, just from the dry skin. Little red dots all over me and I will tell you this, the junior high kids at Emge Jr. High were incredibly gifted at pointing this out to me. Finding unique nicknames, I hadn't even thought of that could be used for such a thing.

I also had cheeks that tended to turn red and they still do sometimes. Some of you might have noticed that. Oh! Around Christmas time the Rudolph references were lovely to receive growing up. Are any of you starting to relate now? Any of you remembering something that maybe you got a little teased about or made you feel ashamed about when you were younger? Maybe it's something right now.

Just turn to the person next to you and tell them what you're thinking of right now. What's the thing that maybe you got made fun of or people commented about and if you just lived a blessed, charmed life, that no one ever made fun of you, you just keep your mouth quiet right now. Share that.

You know, you kinda figure you're going to get over these things, and I thought once I had become a young adult, as in my twenties, none of this stuff would bother me anymore. Well, I was on a mission trip with a bunch of, you guessed it, junior high kids, and high schoolers too and we were at this farm, working at this farm and I was sitting in this wagon and this junior high kid next to me turned and looked at me and she said, "What are all the little red dots on your legs. That's weird!" And

immediately I was 13 years old and insecure. So, maybe we don't always get over these things. But sometimes the stuff that people want to give you shame or ridicule over are ridiculous and we are dealing with a situation of shame that's being tossed around this entire scripture passage today.

It begins with Elizabeth, who in her time period, being a woman who could not bear children made you an object of shame. And so, she was in her later years of life. Old enough now that she had endured years and years of that. And when this blessing came, her husband couldn't believe it could happen and ended up losing his ability to speak, because of his disbelief. That happens earlier in this chapter. But she found herself now pregnant, an opportunity to maybe come out of that shadow of shame but she still lived in seclusion for five months. Why? It's not made clear in this scripture, but maybe she had so much ridicule from those people, she wasn't ready to go through...I mean there could be a possible miscarriage that could happen. I'm not getting engaged in that.

So, for five months she was in seclusion. The sixth month then, Mary, a relative of hers, finds out that she is pregnant, but for her becoming pregnant now becomes a source of shame because she was not yet married. She said she was still a virgin and so this caused some shame in the community and she then goes to live with Elizabeth for several months. They help one another navigate – one who is emerging from a label of shame and the other who has just entered into it. And in their connection, there is comfort and care that's worth us noticing because here in these verses that we often recite during Advent we can simply get lost in the idea of, of yeah, Jesus born of a virgin, blah, blah, blah. Let's move on.

God has placed this story in the midst of our scriptures for you and I to get something else out of it. We didn't need to have all this back story of what these ladies went through and yet we are given it to point us perhaps to some bigger messages.

There are three messages here, I think. One is about the identity of Jesus. One is about how we use shame as people of faith, and I think the third is one that could be very relevant to our experience of Christmas this year.

First of all, when it comes to Jesus, there is definitely that aspect of the scriptures here that you recognize. There is something miraculous about how Jesus came into this world. There is something different about this Jesus who has come in. There are some who want to tear apart these miracles that are in our scriptures and say, well probably it wasn't true. Well, I'm going to tell you now. This is a terrible story if you made it up because you took the mother of this Savior to come and you made

her an object of shame. You brought questions to the story and early hearer of the story would be like, wait a minute. What? She was a virgin? What? It's a stumbling block in the story, really. There's much better ways to tell the story if you want to make up stuff. There is an indication of some of the truth in the scriptures that it is an inconvenient story and yet held together by the Holy Spirit to this day that you hear it thousands of years later.

So, we know there is miraculous happenings around the child within Elizabeth, who becomes John the Baptist and the child within Mary who becomes Jesus our Savior.

Now when it comes to the shame aspect of this, I hope that these scriptures demonstrate what a ridiculous technique shame is for people of faith. How destructive it came in these women's lives. Elizabeth, who finally becomes pregnant, she has a husband who can't speak, which might have been a gift to her. We don't know how their marriage was, but she's truly isolated because she spends five months in seclusion and her husband can't speak so she's truly isolated for all of this time. And this is the environment that this shame and guilt of the community created for her and when Mary, who has this incredible blessing, she has to navigate an entire field of shame to get through that.

Unfortunately, we in the church over the years have been way too good at using shame and guilt and finger-pointing as some type of perceived motivation for holiness and living according to God's Word. In all my years of seeing people go through difficult times in their lives, seeing people go through places where maybe they did make a horrible decision, or maybe a horrible circumstance came upon them, I do not recall any of those moments when pointing to that person and shaming them and belittling them helped. And yet we've done it so much.

We celebrated communion today. There have been times in the life of the church where people have actually not come forward for communion because of the shame and the guilt that the community put upon them. "Oh, well you know, they just got divorced last month." And then they don't feel that they can come and receive communion? "Oh, well you know they've got trouble" and people actually carry a shame about coming and participating in the very act of God's grace in a sacramental ritual because of the shame that their community threw upon them. We don't do anyone any good.

We have all this beautiful mess out there of all those gifts for these families that we're connected with for the holiday. There's a version of this where we go, "Now wait a gosh darn minute here. What exactly are these people doing with their lives

and do they deserve all these gifts. Maybe they made some bad choices and they need to re-examine that and if we give them Christmas gifts, they'll just do more bad stuff." Yeah! That's stupid Christianity. "Yeah, we should examine exactly the way every single one of those families is living their lives and decisions they've made and then we'll decide if they get Christmas gifts from us, the people of God."

I tell you what. If we're going to get on that train, let's do it with all of you too. Who's the first one that wants to come up here and dig into your life. Let's figure all the places you've been less than your very best self. Let's shame you. Let's make you a disgrace and then maybe if you feel that burden, you'll finally turn your life around to the purity it needs to be. What a ridiculous thing to do and yet in subtle ways, in side comments, in little looks and actions that have taken place, we have done this to people.

Some will say, it just makes it too permissive. Look! At some point you're probably going to have to make the decision in your life whether you are going to lean into yourself as the yielder of justice, or yourself as the yielder of grace. And you have to imagine when you look at the radical ministry of Jesus Christ, who seemed to be more concerned about offering people grace and forgiveness than shaming them, guiltning them. If you're going to follow the example or not and to imagine that when your day of accountability comes before the Lord, you imagine that your God is going to say, "You didn't shame enough people. You didn't point enough fingers. You didn't make people feel low for the mistakes they made and for the conflicts they ran into. You just let too much go by."

Or do you imagine that your God is going to want to celebrate with you the way that you were an agent of grace and forgiveness and you made space for people to be people who make mistakes. That you made space for there to be people who sometimes just need a break because what has happened in their life, because of the way that they are made, because of the circumstances and decisions that are made around them and maybe even through them, they just need someone to give them some grace. That just sounds more like what a Christian should do.

And finally from all of this, I think in this particular season what we see in Elizabeth and Mary is a friendship that is together, that as one is coming out of a period of being shamed and rejected and one is entering it, they care for one another which suggests that maybe this is something that we should look for in our own Christmas experience because I bet there is someone out there that needs the relationship that you have to offer. There is someone in your universe, someone you know who could really use a call from you, who could really use an invitation for a cup of coffee,

lunch, some of your precious time because we live in a world that has filled you so much with to-do's and information and weariness upon your decision-making that we find ourselves with less time to give to people and we let things and lists and to-do's and worry fill the calendar. Right now there's someone I bet that you can think of, that would be blessed by you just giving them a phone call today or just taking 10-15 minutes to really see how they are doing. I bet every single one of you can think of a person.

Is there room in your life for that relationship, and if there isn't maybe there is something wrong with the room you have in your life. And where we can be friends for one another and help one another and share some burdens so that you get a little space, then let's do that. Make room, room for the relationships because that's how others might experience grace and when they experience grace that's when others might find space for Christ in their Christmas by your gift of the room that you have in your heart. May that be the source of joy for you this Christmas as you make space for others.

Halleluiah and Amen.