

Luke 1:39-56 The Message (MSG)

Mary did not waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zachariah's house, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly,

You are so blessed among women,
and the babe in your womb, also blessed!
And why am I so blessed that the mother of my
Lord visits me?
The moment the sound of your greeting entered
my ears,
The babe in my womb skipped like a lamb for
sheer joy.
Blessed woman, who believed what God said,
believed every word would come true!

And Mary said, I am bursting with God-news;
I am dancing the song of my Savior God.
God took one good look at me, and look what
happened—
I am the most fortunate woman on earth!
What God has done for me will never be
forgotten,

the God whose very name is holy, set apart
from all others.

God's mercy flows in wave after wave
on those who are in awe before God.
God bared an arm and showed strength,
scattered the bluffing braggarts.
God knocked tyrants off their high horses,
pulled victims out of the mud.
The starving poor sat down to a banquet;
and the callous rich were left out in the cold.
God embraced God's chosen child, Israel;
God remembered and piled on the mercies,
piled them high.
It is exactly what God promised,
beginning with Abraham and right up to now.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months and
then went back to her
own home.

Living Out of Love

Will you pray with me? Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.

This scripture forms the very heart of our Christian faith – Jesus himself said this is the greatest commandment of all. For me, this is the scripture to which I turn for guidance. This is the Word by which I try to measure my thoughts, words and actions. Am I acting in love? Am I loving God? Am I loving neighbor? Am I loving myself? Sometimes this last one is the hardest of all.

Now I don't always get it right. I can relate closely to Senator Cory Booker's story about encountering a man who is homeless who asks him if he has extra socks. "No," Senator Booker tells the man, "I don't have socks. I do not have socks." And then the guy with the Senator

reaches down, removes the socks he is wearing and hands them to the man who is homeless. How easy it is to preach love and then to experience a failure of imagination in the moment when love's creativity is asked of us. Yes. I can relate.

This week, as I've reflected on God's gift of love, as I have thought about what it means to live out of love, it cannot be mere coincidence that I have been hearing a lot of love stories. Three just from our congregation: One starts in a dentist's office; one tells of high school sweethearts who find each other again after two decades and a marriage a piece apart, and one involving years of unrequited love. I've also heard some non-romantic love stories -- a politician's love for his country and constituents; an elderly woman's love for the church; and yes, this morning's scripture -- a young woman's love for her God.

Immediately preceding today's reading, the angel Gabriel appears to Mary to tell her that she has found favor with God and will bear the Christ child. Mary is initially perplexed, confused, even fearful, and she questions how any of this will occur. The angel explains, "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 is impossible with God.”

Mary, responds simply: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be so with me.”

All too often, we think of Mary’s love for God as meek and mild, submissive and subservient. And yet, she has the gumption to ask the angel how all this is going to happen. Unlike Moses who must be convinced, or Samuel who does not recognize God’s voice, unlike Jonah who tries to flee from God, Mary has the temerity to say yes the first time around.

And then Mary does not stay by herself in meditation and prayer, though that would be fine, too. She does not go to her betrothed, Joseph. No, Mary has the audacity to set off --

not wasting a minute -- to see a trusted older relative who just might understand the strangeness and wonder of it all. After all, elderly Elizabeth is pregnant, too. In the midst of major life changes, in the midst of the unexpected, Mary has the self-awareness and wherewithal to seek acceptance, safety, and community in the presence of someone who knows and loves her.

See, saying yes to God’s love is difficult, often scary, and almost always risky business. It requires us to risk, at the least, looking foolish and at the most our very lives.

Senator Cory Booker, talks repeatedly about “unreasonable, irrational, impractical love,”¹ and love is those things – unreasonable, irrational and impractical. Booker reminds us that love involves more than polite tolerance of one another, and he points to the end of our declaration of Independence. Did you know our nation’s founders, the writers of the Declaration of Independence “mutually pledge [their] lives, fortunes and sacred honor to one another”? I

¹<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/12/cory-booker-talks-about-love-and-eyes-presidential-run/578242/>

didn't. Senator Booker fittingly calls this document our **Declaration of interdependence, our declaration of love.**

See, the truth that Senator Booker is picking up on. The truth that Mary lives into when she wastes not a minute before going to see her elderly relative Elizabeth is that **in order to live out of love, we need each other.** Every love story needs a whole community: the people around us who cajole, advise, and yes sometimes even convince. Mary **needs** Elizabeth as she contemplates the yes she has said to God.

The love stories I heard this week are no different. Every last one had ancillary characters without whom the whole thing would have been a non-starter. There's the sister who pushes and pushes not just for a second date, but a third as well. The friend who insists on taking our protagonist to a group for recent divorcees and simultaneously plants a seed in his old sweetheart's mind. There is the dad who keeps two people connected, though it seems their relationship will never be more than platonic. There are the mentors and role models who make the politician the man he is today. And

finally, yes, the older relative and confidante who welcomes Mary not just with open arms and a listening ear but with an affirmation: You are so blessed among women!

We need each other because living out of love is downright hard sometimes.

Spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle writes that "to love is to recognize yourself in another" – to love is to recognize our commonality. Yes, that is the beginning, but I believe that to love is more than that. To love also means recognizing and relating to that which is different.

So often, we seek to live by the golden rule to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. But love goes deeper than this -- love recognizes that caring for you might look different than caring for myself, because your needs, your love language, your way of receiving love may be different than mine. In our closest friendships, in our romantic relationships, in relationship to our children and parents, in relationship to one another in this church part of the work is for us to learn how to love each other well. Part of the work is to learn how to love each other's

differences. Because love does not call us to our lowest common denominator but to the very best that we all can offer. Love calls us to embrace our differences, not just to tolerate them.

This is what it means to be community at our best. To share not just what we have in common but all that makes us different, all that makes our community beautiful and strong.

[PAUSE]

I do not think it is mere coincidence that I've been hearing a lot of love stories this week. See, this week, we are getting ever closer to the culmination of a centuries-long, multigenerational epic love story -- the love story of God and God's people. That is what the Bible is, after all -- not a rule book or a how-to, not a recipe for living a faithful life (though it does contain elements of these things). No, ultimately the Bible is the love story of God and us -- God and our ancestors, God and you and me.

And we need each other in this story. We need each other's honesty, respect and acceptance, even or especially when we disagree. We need each other's patience and care. We need each other's quirkiness and gifts. Just as Mary needed Elizabeth, so do we need each other.

See, God's love story with us flows through all sorts of different people: "through prestigious prophets and 'nowhere' towns; through young women (Mary) and old women (Elizabeth); [through believers and doubters alike;] through stars and shepherds and scripture and song.... [This] beautiful, ancient story insists that God's love is a force that [makes] and remakes the world."² God's love is a force that makes and remakes us.

This Advent and Christmas season let us remember that we are never alone in this journey. Let us learn from those who have gone before us, building upon their legacies. Let us lean on each other, on this community of faith. And let us boldly proclaim, "God's love has come! It is here. It lives in each of us and in our world."

²<http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/12/17/love-remakes-the-world-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-advent-week-four>

Amen.

Let us pray:

Holy God, the mountains may depart, the hills may be removed, but your steadfast love will not depart from us. Help us to receive your love, O God. Help us to live out of that love, to cultivate it in our lives and to share it with all whom we meet. Amen.

[Through whom does God's love story with you flow? Who has helped you know and experience and live into God's love? Who has encouraged, advised or cajoled you as you say yes to living into God's love? Shout out the names!]