

“Lessons from a Place Where No Man Ought to Go”

Luke 1:39-55

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

December 23, 2018

There are some places where no man ought to go, some subjects on which no man with any sense should speak. Somewhere near the top of this list is the subject of pregnancy. I think we all know that if childbirth were up to men, our species would have ended with the first generation. And the truth is even when we think we are being sensitive in talking about pregnancy, we probably aren't.

I will never forget an Advent in Richmond when Dana was asked to read part of the Christmas story in the King James Version when she was quite pregnant. In the KJV Luke 2:5 says that Mary was “great with child” and Dana was asked to read these words while she was great with child. It did not go over well, I can assure you.

There are some places where no man ought to go, but what do you do when you find yourself behind a pulpit on a Sunday like this when the central text for the day describes a conversation between two women, both of whom are pregnant? Obviously I am talking about Elizabeth and Mary who are pregnant with John and Jesus, two children who will grow up to take central roles in salvation history, two men who will inspire profound faith and experience brutal deaths.

How can a man even begin to fathom what these two women are thinking and feeling? How can Luke, being a man, write about this with appropriate sensitivity and insight? How can a man like me presume to speak to the depths of this text?

It's already dangerous enough with Mary's song we call the Magnificat with all of its political overtones, this business of bringing down the powerful and lifting up the lowly. Now we add this business about two women who are pregnant. This might be a good day to run to the Hebrew canon, except Micah talks about birth too. Or perhaps I could preach on the Christian Testament, except this text from Hebrews is about Jesus' death, not his birth.

So, I am back to Luke and this story about Elizabeth and Mary, and Zechariah and Joseph. How should I approach this text? With great care, as if walking through a field with landmines, and with the aid of female voices I will name and credit along the way.

Perhaps the place to begin is with the obvious. This is a story about two women in very different places of life, but who have much in common, including the fact that they are both vulnerable. Elizabeth is much older than Mary. Luke says that Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah, a priest, are “getting on in years (Luke 1:7).” That’s about as flattering as being “great with child” though not quite as bad as being “as good as dead” which is how Hebrews 11:12 refers to Abraham when he and Sarah have a child in their dotage.

Anyway, Elizabeth is much older than Mary and she has no children at a time when this reality not only brings personal sadness but judgment from others, even though she and her husband have lived blamelessly. She has reached the place in life when she might just be too old to have any children, like Abraham and Sarah, but an angel appears to Zechariah and tells him they will have a child and indeed Elizabeth becomes pregnant. It is wonderful yet also unsettling at this place in life. I think of a waitress I knew in Richmond who became pregnant again in her fifties when she was already grandmother. She was not exactly thrilled at first!

Mary is much younger than Elizabeth. In fact, she is not even married yet. She is only engaged to Joseph with whom she has never slept when an angel tells her she will have a special child named Jesus. We know the story, Mary is at first perplexed and then confused, but eventually she says, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word (Luke 1:38).” She accepts her role, but she too must feel a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. Childbirth is dangerous in this time, she’s not ready for a child, she is too young and only engaged. What will people think? What will she do?

So, these two are in different places of life, but they are both vulnerable, and they are somehow related, according to Luke 1:36. They look forward to parenthood with both joy and anxiety, like all

parents, but there is added weight here with the expectation of these two boys to be born. After Jesus is born, a wise old man named Simeon adds to this weight, recognizing Jesus as God's agent of salvation but also telling Mary that Jesus is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel and that a sword will pierce her soul too (Luke 2:27-35).

Beyond the specifics of these two children to be born and all they mean to us, the life situation of these two women reminds us that women are often vulnerable, that parenthood is a daunting challenge, and that there are no guarantees about family life. It's why we need to be careful with words around cultural recognitions of family like Mother's Day and Father's Day. Giving thanks for parents is appropriate, but not only do some grieve the loss of parents, others have negative experiences with parents, some have wanted to be parents but have not been able to for various reasons and some have encountered burdens beyond the usual in parenthood. Talk of family evokes many different emotions.

In this week's issue of the Baptist Women in Ministry newsletter, Executive Director Pam Durso, who is a friend to many of us and has spoken here on a Wednesday night, says that this story of two pregnant women is very significant for her. In particular, she resonates with the experience Elizabeth and Zechariah have with infertility because she and her husband were not able to have children. They eventually adopted two children and she sees hope in the biblical story, hope that does not depend on a happy ending (we'll get to that), but the naming of this kind of struggle, in and of itself, is helpful to Pam and many others.

Sometimes we seem to assume that faithful church folk don't have to deal with issues others do - infertility, abuse, addiction, homelessness, etc. - but we do. We deal with every issue human beings confront. We are not exempt. Luke says that Zechariah and Elizabeth are righteous before God, they live blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord (1:6), and yet they have no children until this late-in-life miracle. It's contrary to the thinking of the day, the belief that faithfulness is rewarded directly, but this couple is faithful. Many faithful people today face all sorts of messy realities in their lives and in the lives of their loved ones. The church needs to recognize this not just in principle but in the way we shape community life.

But this story not only offers a reminder of just how messy and vulnerable our lives are, it underscores the significance of community, or to be more precise, finding people who understand our challenges. There is an old saying about misery loving company, but the more precise form of the saying is that misery loves equally miserable company. We seek out people who have been through something like what we have, whether it is a joyful experience or a sorrowful one.

In a recent issue of *The Christian Century* Christian educator Austin Crenshaw Shelley writes about our reading from Luke, noting that her unborn daughter kicked for the first time on the day of her ordination. So, motherhood and ministry have been intertwined for her ever since, and like Pam Durso, this is a very significant text for her.

One thing she focuses on is Mary's urgency. As soon as she embraces her calling, Luke says she sets out with haste to a Judean town in the hill country to see Elizabeth. We are not told why she goes, but we don't have to be. The angel has told her that her relative Elizabeth has also become pregnant in a sacred and mysterious way. So, Mary, trying to make sense of this awe-inspiring, gut-wrenching, life-transforming experience, seeks out the only other person she knows who might be able to understand what she is going through.

As it turns out, she can. Elizabeth's child leaps at Mary's greeting, Elizabeth offers a blessing on Mary and Mary breaks forth into song, the Magnificat. Why does Mary go? Because she needs community, people with whom to share her experience, someone who will understand.

Now, the rabbis argue about whether it helps or hurts to find fellow strugglers. One perspective is that we find comfort in knowing someone else is going through what we are. It lets us know we are not alone. The other perspective is that this adds to our struggle. "What?" we say, "My pain is not enough, I have to add their pain to mine?!" And I know some people are saved by support groups while other people find them to be a waste of time. But for most of us it helps immensely to find community, equally miserable company or equally joyful company.

So, we join support groups to help us with our grief and recovery groups to help us stay clean after addiction. We join Sunday School classes and small groups where we find people with whom we have

things in common. We gather in formal and informal ways with other moms and dads of young children, other adults caring for parents. Even alum groups watching ballgames together offer supportive community, deepening the joy of a victory, softening the pain of a loss. Like Mary, we seek out people who can understand our joys and challenges.

But as we approach this story carefully, and with the aid of female voices, there is at least one more lesson to note, the most central lesson of all. We not only find here a reminder of the vulnerability of women and families as well as an underscoring of the significance of community; we find a message of hope, strong and resilient hope.

The most obvious manifestation of hope is the birth of these children and the men they become. After years of waiting, Zechariah and Elizabeth finally have a child and he becomes the forerunner of the Messiah. Mary embraces her calling and gives birth to Jesus who becomes the Savior of the world. But not only does this story point to the Good News of salvation; two vulnerable women play critical roles in God's plan. Neither John nor Jesus makes it into the world without help.

It is a clear word of affirmation for women and the vulnerable, those who live on the margins of society. It is a word of hope for a world where women are still undervalued and treated with disrespect and where the marginalized are at best ignored and at worst demonized. Powerful men may still get away with mistreating, harassing and assaulting women, and political leaders may still gain popularity by identifying one group after another to demonize – immigrants, Muslims, LBBT people and others – but God uses women and the marginalized in the path to salvation. There is hope in this reality.

Yet, in her article, Pam Durso says the hope she finds in this story is not tied just to the happy ending with two babies being born. She finds hope throughout this story – in the fact that Zechariah goes about his temple duties faithfully over the years even when his hope for a child is not realized, in the words of promise that are spoken to him by an angel, in the sacredness of Zechariah's silence.

I would add there is hope in the willingness of Elizabeth and Mary to go along with absurd promises and then realities of pregnancy,

childbirth and parenthood. And as I have said, there is hope for women and all the marginalized in the central roles these two play in salvation history. There is hope throughout this story because the kind of hope we have is not dependent on specific outcomes and realities.

Pam Durso puts it this way.

Our hope is not just wishful thinking about the future, or dreams of what can be. Our hope grows out of reliance on God. Our hope comes from our connection with God's purposes and our desire for God's presence. Our hope is in the God who holds our future, but our hope is also in our God who is with us now, our God who gives us the strength to deal with the chaos of life, with the hurts and suffering that we all encounter. Our hope is in God.

Indeed, it is, and this is good news, really good news, because a hoped-for child will not always be born, a prayed-for loved one will not always get well, the dream job or relationship will not always be found, but God will be with us no matter what. This much we can count on, this is the message of this season - a child is born for us, God comes to dwell with us, God gives us strength for the chaos we must face. This is where our hope lies.

There are some places where no man ought to go, some subjects on which no man with any sense should speak, but if we just let the women speak for themselves in this story, we hear what we need to hear. Life is messy, but we are not alone, we have each other and God is with us always. All of this we know because of two strong women.