

“A Joyful Purpose”
Judges 13:2-7, 1 John 3:1-3, Luke 1:46-56

Pastor Liz Miller
December 12, 2021

Today is my birthday. If you're going to work on your birthday, you might as well get to be with everyone you love, doing the thing you love most in the world. Birthdays always cause me to reflect on my origin story. I know I'm not the only one who does this on their birthday - we're spending a whole month thinking and singing about Jesus's origin story. I think I got the idea from him.

When my mom tells my birth story, she always starts with talking about how she went into labor while she was watching *How The Grinch Stole Christmas*. She usually starts singing, “You're a mean one, Mr. Grinch...” I claim that is why I love Christmas so much but I can also be a little grumpy.

But when I think about my birth story, I think about what it means to be born in Advent, this season of waiting and anticipation, and what it means to be named after a woman whose story is told every Advent, Elizabeth. The Biblical Elizabeth and I have more in common with our stories than our names or our Advent appearances. Had I been born in her time, I would have also had her label of barren, or what we call today infertile, unable to conceive a child. I have known this my whole life, being diagnosed soon after birth with a condition that has this side effect, so I've had 38 years to think about the coincidence. It does seem like an odd coincidence, doesn't it? An Advent birth, a Biblical namesake, a parallel start to our stories? There have been times in my life when it felt like a very unfair coincidence, even painful. I knew not to expect a miraculous pregnancy in my future and there were times I wondered, “What good does it do to share the same name and the same beginnings if my story doesn't end the same? What is the lesson in that?”

I once asked my mom what she thought about the coincidence of naming her barren child after a barren namesake and she said, “I've never really thought about that. We named you Elizabeth because it means ‘Gift from God’ and that is what you were.”

Today I am grateful for my namesake Elizabeth, and not just for her - for all the so-called barren women in the Bible. For Sarah and Rachel and Rebekah and Elizabeth, for the Shunammite who was an acolyte to the prophet Elisha, and for the wife of Manoah, whose name we don't know, but whose story we heard read today. I am also grateful for our progressive Christian traditions that invite us to read underneath, behind, and inside the literal words on the page to find deeper meaning in these women and their lives - each was thought to be barren and became pregnant, but their pregnancies are about more than pregnancy. The language of birth was the language they had at the time to explain that these women were called by God, and that their lives had purpose and meaning that was bigger than they once imagined for themselves, bigger than anyone had imagined for them. God called them to their purpose. Could that mean being called to be a parent? Absolutely. Could it also mean something different? Absolutely.

Mary's story is one that is related to these previous women, literally related to Elizabeth as Harold so beautifully preached on last Sunday, but is slightly different. The stakes are raised for Mary - her pregnancy is a true miracle and not the result of years of trying with a husband - such that we cannot ignore that God has called a woman who might be young enough to be considered a girl, untethered to a man meaning should would have been ignored and overlooked

in society, someone so insignificant that the real miracle is that we still know her name - God called this woman and told her that she had a purpose bigger than she had imagined, bigger than anyone imagined for her.

Mary's response to this revelation is our clue as to how we know when we have been called by God for a certain purpose. Mary's response is joy. She sings, "My soul magnifies the Holy One, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Joy echoes in her words

We talk about calling and purpose a lot in church. Sometimes we explore how our call is the result of gifts and talents that we have and are equipped to use in service to the world. Sometimes we talk about how our call is the result of the relationships that have nurtured or mentored us into being. We talk about how our callings can follow us into the workplace but how they can also be present in our homes, in our volunteer life, in the church - none of us have just one calling or purpose in the world but are called to many things, many places, many relationships.

One thread that carries across our callings is joy. What brings you joy? What about your work or volunteer duties connect you with joy? That joy you feel might be the sign that God has revealed a calling to you. What people in your life bring you joy? That joy might be God calling you to nurture those relationships. Joy is different than happiness - joy is deeper and more robust. Joy is less like "I feel good right now" and more like, "I have a deep satisfaction within my spirit that tells me I am where I am supposed to be, doing what I am supposed to be doing."

Joy can reside alongside tension or grief or hardship. I know teachers who feel discouraged by the wages they make or by their treatment from an administration but when they are in a classroom with their students, they know deep in their spirit that is where they are meant to be. Joy radiates in their teaching.

I know advocates for justice who feel grief for how long it takes to move another inch toward justice, and grow frustrated by political games and corrupted power, but when they are working alongside other activists and advocates, they know deep within their spirit that these are their people and this is good, important work they are doing. They don't always end their days happy, but there is joy in committing their time to work that is fulfilling, work to which they are called.

I know people who are caretakers for loved ones - sometimes their parents, sometimes their spouses or siblings, sometimes their grown children. There can be weariness and fatigue in caretaking, wondering if you are making the right decisions, struggling to find a balance where your life ends and the person you are caring for life begins, struggling to find enough time to care for yourself. And there can also be moments of joy in knowing this is love, for better and for worse, that being called to care for a beloved in a season of your life is an act of sacrificial love that is born of connection, deep relationships, and commitment. God is revealed in relationship.

In Advent we are drawn to these women, to the overlooked Mary's and the discouraged Elizabeth's because Advent is a season about calling. It is a time when we proclaim loudly, "Christ is coming!" And then a little quieter we ask, "And what does that mean? What am I called to because of Christ's birth and life? Knowing what we know about God's presence in the world, what is my purpose?"

Or if we ask the question in the context of Mary's response to the revelation of her purpose and call - what makes our heart sing? What fills us with joy?

For some of us, our callings and purpose may have been clear us to our whole lives. The kid who was always taking things apart and putting them back together who grew up to be an engineer. The artist who loved doodling as a child that grew up to be a great painter or who

found painting as a hobby that sustained them throughout their lifetime and brought them joy as they recovered from a more laborious work.

Our dreams may have been steady and in line with the way God is revealed to us in our lifetime. But for most of us, there will have been some surprises along the way. Dreams we once had that never came to fruition, not because of our talents or gifts but because of where we grew up and the opportunities we had. Dreams that changed and transformed as we changed and transformed because of life experiences and wisdom accrued. Or maybe our callings and purpose were things that we never knew we could dream about, never considered it to be possible.

Like Mary, it may be something has never happened done before.

Like Elizabeth and the so-called barren women, it may be something you were told you couldn't do.

I am thankful that my mom, who surely had her own dreams of what her daughter's life would be or who I would become, understood from the beginning that my life, exactly as it is, was a gift from God. There was nothing lacking in it. There was nothing missing. I did not need to grieve the ways I was different from others or try to be something I'm not; my life was a gift. That has allowed me to stay open to where God is calling me, even if it surprises me, even when it goes in directions I didn't think were possible.

The lesson my namesake Elizabeth and her cousin Mary have taught me is to stay open to the unexpected, take comfort in those relationships that make you feel supported and seen, and whenever possible: rejoice. Amen.