

“Prenatal Gymnastics”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Luke 1:39-55

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Fourth Advent

Two pregnant women begin what will be three months together in our first Gospel reading. Jesus’ mother, Mary, will travel to visit John the Baptist’s mother, Elizabeth. Prior to this, Luke has recounted that Elizabeth was presumably past child bearing age when an angel announced to her husband, Zechariah, that she would conceive. When Zechariah questioned the angel about this news, he was silenced for the duration of Elizabeth’s pregnancy. This would have been a problem, because Zechariah was a chief priest; but then, perhaps it was a situation his congregation might welcome: a preacher silenced for nine months. Let us hear our first reading, the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth. [Luke 1:39-45]

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’*

If they had been famous, their names would have been all over the tabloids at the checkout stands of Metrowest groceries. Headlines would highlight a conception by an unmarried virgin, and the pregnancy of a menopausal woman, whose clergy husband cannot speak. Yet, they were not that famous, so about the only thing we can imagine is a human interest story in the local Town Crier about the surprising pregnancy of a very old couple and how happy they are.

It is Luke who brings these two women, these two families together as headline news as he writes his Gospel in the latter half of the first century. In those seven verses of the Visitation, prenatal gymnastics mark both the action of God’s Spirit and clarify the relation between the sons to which these two women will give birth.

In full disclosure, my sermon title was borrowed. In a commentary on the text, Patrick Gray writes, “To paraphrase Freud, sometimes a baby kicking is just a baby kicking. Prenatal gymnastics, however, frequently carry deep meaning in the Bible.” [Feasting on the Gospel, Luke, Volume 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, p. 21)]

The phrase struck a chord with me, seeming to capture the activity, in those seven verses of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, of the Holy Spirit moving through the household of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Two pregnancies keep the Spirit kicking. Elizabeth is about to give birth to John, the messenger, and Mary will then give birth to Jesus, the message.

I did not search ancestry.com, but Luke tells us Elizabeth and Mary were kinfolk, called cousins in some translations, which also makes Jesus and John cousins. The exact relation might be about the same as what Richard Swanson has writes about his wife's family from a small town in rural Minnesota: "... everyone is everyone's cousin. Some of them are second cousins, some are double cousins, some are first-cousins-once-removed, and some are cousins-just-too-complicated-to-figure out. They just call all of them cousins. It works. The same thing appears true for John and Jesus." [Swanson, Richard, Provoking the Gospel of Luke, (Pilgrim Press, 2006)]

Writing some thirty or forty years after the deaths of Jesus and John the Baptist, Luke seeks to clarify the relationship between the two men, as each of their offshoot movements still have followers. Reading between the lines of the Gospels, we can sense a continuing rivalry exists between the followers of John and Jesus.

Through Elizabeth's responses to Mary's visit, both physical and verbal, Luke prioritizes Jesus. Mary's arrival and voice cause John the Baptist to kick in Elizabeth's womb and the Holy Spirit to fill her. This prompted Elizabeth's words, which I suspect were particularly familiar to Catholics who learned, "Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb,..."

Then, out of the mouth of the mother of John the Baptist came a name, a role for Mary's child, Elizabeth asks, "And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" "The mother of my Lord..." For those still following the ways and teachings of John the Baptist, and who might have seen Jesus' followers to be a rival movement, Luke is pretty much saying, "Are you really going to question John's mother about who she says is her Lord?"

So, as we are about to read Mary's Magnificat, we see it emerges not only from the conception announcement by the angel Gabriel that Mary would give birth to a Savior, but also the affirmation of her relative Elizabeth. Her Magnificat, the Latin for "magnifies" begins with her personal feeling of blessing, but it soon overflows into a hope of blessing for the world's most fragile and vulnerable.

Let us hear Mary's song:

46 *And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord,*
 47 *and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*
 48 *for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
 49 *for the Mighty One has done great things for me,*
and holy is his name.
 50 *His mercy is for those who fear him*
from generation to generation.
 51 *He has shown strength with his arm;*
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
 52 *He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,*
and lifted up the lowly;
 53 *he has filled the hungry with good things,*
and sent the rich away empty.
 54 *He has helped his servant Israel,*
in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

While our lessons of the Visitation and Magnificat are fairly familiar, I sometimes hear it and think, that is a nice story, but I don't really have many points of reference, and the story is not really ours. Yes, we know about pregnancies, and even kicking babies, but we probably could relate better if Mary had arrived at Elizabeth's for a baby shower, with gifts and party games for both pregnant women.

Or wait a minute. If we want reality, let us remember Mary is young, and single, and pregnant. While there is still today an amount of stigma attached to what we call "out of wedlock" pregnancies, back then, Mary would have certainly been ostracized. It would almost make more sense to us if, upon learning Mary was pregnant, her older cousin reacted with a series of questions: "You're what?! Who did this to you? How could you be so dumb?" I mean even when there is nothing we can do to change a situation, we often seize such an opportunity to give a good lecture. Even asking, "Mary, what are we going to do?" would seem to make more sense than a baby leaping in a womb and the Holy Spirit filling Elizabeth with joy.

As Mary travels to visit her cousin, Luke is inviting us along on the journey. Elizabeth and Mary, a barren old woman and a young virgin, are about to give birth to babies, with no clue their two sons would face early death, one by beheading and the other by crucifixion. What they share is a sense their pregnancies, the new lives they hold within them, are not reasonably explainable, but part of something larger than either of them.

It is clear God is at work within Luke's account of the Visitation and the Magnificat. It might be hard for us to conceive of a woman being pregnant well after menopause, or even a baby being conceived within a virgin, but for me, the message is not belief about how or even whether, but that God is still at work, the Spirit is still kicking, in all our lives. We reach endings in our life and work, but we are forever to be open to the new; we anticipate beginnings in our lives, but do well to be alert to new conceptions. The Spirit is still kicking in old and young, but we may resist it, or ignore it, or perhaps not even feel it.

For one thing, our culture instills in us an attitude by which we evaluate things based on the question, "What's in this for me?" Mary voices this in the first line of her Magnificat, giving thanks for all God has done for her. Yet, when "What's in it for me?" is the primary measure for evaluating our lives and what we will do, we will miss a great deal. Sometimes, God's Spirit leads us into places we have deliberately avoided, or never expected to be at our age – and that may be old age, or youthful age, or that age called middle.

As I hear Mary's Magnificat, I am alerted to ways to identify if it is God's Spirit I am sensing, or my own ego or desire. What I notice is that after she gives thanks for what God has done for her, Mary's song overflows past herself into a prophetic picture of God's hope for the lowly and hungry. It seems to me, a sign it is God's Spirit kicking in us, is if we are prodded past our own lives.

I have wondered about what's kicking in me? I particularly think about what will be kicking in me after I stop preaching, pastoring? My formal ministry may end, but I know the Spirit keeps kicking, and from Mary's words, I am pretty sure it is not ushering me into a recliner, but kicking me out of it.

The kicking baby is no accident. The presence of the Spirit is not incidental. And we know it is God's Spirit when it propels us past "What is in it for me?," past ourselves, so we see the face of Christ as much in the least of these as the proud and rich about whom Mary sings.

Mary recognizes she has fully joined the unfolding story of God's fidelity to Abraham and his descendants, and the covenant journey into God's future. So, too, we are invited to see ourselves as fellow travelers, joining centuries of the faithful who seek to walk with God. We are not alone. We are part of story bigger than any one of us can imagine. I think of those refugee-migrant images we have been seeing for several months; the lines of people, men, women, children, traveling together from a place of familiarity to a place of hope, yet unsure of how they will be welcomed. We are part of a greater journey of faith.

In the hymn, "Canticle of the Turning" we will sing of the world being turned upside down, not by us, but by God. It marks the contrasts in Mary's song, but also how God deals with times of barrenness.

Barren is how older women like Elizabeth were labeled, as were Sarah and Hannah before her. Barren, empty, drained of life, no hope for new life, abandoned, even forsaken. Yet, that term is not just reserved for women without children, for each of us can feel times of barrenness, of desert dryness, of an abandonment of hope.

The good news is we are part of a larger story, and have faith in a merciful God, who willingly bypasses the fertile to nurture the barren. This is not a God waiting for the wealthy to trickle down hope to the poor. We are part of a story, and have faith in a Savior who will not be beholden to the rich and proud, but who will identify with the poor, and feed the hungry, and sit with those others have rejected.

We know the anticipation of something new in our lives, and know this often brings mixed feelings of fear and exhilaration. We sense the Spirit's presence leading us into the newness at every age and stage of life. At times of beginnings and times of endings, the Spirit's prenatal gymnastics alert us there is a new journey God to which God is calling us.