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Luke 1:24-45  
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### We Find Joy in Connecting

In the early to mid 19th century, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had become one of America's most respected scholars and poets. His success and fame sprouted at the early age of twenty two. "With a wonderful wife, a dynamic reputation, [a new teaching post at Harvard], and a fine house overlooking the Charles River, Henry seemed to have it all."<sup>1</sup>

Shortly there after tragedy struck when his beloved wife became ill and died. It took Henry seven years to recover from his loss before regaining the confidence to remarry to his second wife. They welcomed five children into their home. The good life seemed to have returned to the Longfellow home.

Until tragedy struck yet again. "While lighting a match, Longfellow's second wife's clothes caught fire and she burned to death."<sup>2</sup> On top of all that, the nation was then embroiled in the American Civil War. His oldest son was wounded in battle at age nineteen and returned home to recover.

One Christmas Day, on December 25, 1863, Henry heard the church bells ringing off in the distance. "Where is the peace?" Henry asked himself. So he picked up his pen and wrote a poem titled, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." It's a haunting poem, now much loved Christmas song, that calls out the juxtaposition between the evil of the world on the one hand and the joy and hope that Jesus brings on the other.

Within the poem, Henry answered his own soul's question of God's presence during such a dark and solemn time. He also countered the mainstream philosopher of his day, Frederick Nietzsche, who claimed that God was dead.

Henry wrote, "Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: 'God is not dead, nor doth He sleep; the wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with peace on earth, goodwill to men.'"

What Henry Wadsworth Longfellow attested was that we don't need to justify the existence of good and evil, right and wrong. They just are. I think it also shows his own willingness to hold in tension both devastating grief with the hope that God would make the crooked places in life straight, and the rough places smooth.

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<sup>1</sup> Ace Collins, *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 82.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

In our scripture story today, we find Elizabeth, now six months pregnant, receiving a visit from her younger cousin Mary, who had also had her own visit from the angel Gabriel. Join me as we read from Luke 1:26-45.

**26** In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, **27** to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. **28** The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

**29** Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. **30** But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. **31** You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. **32** He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, **33** and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

**34** "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

**35** The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called[a] the Son of God. **36** Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. **37** For no word from God will ever fail."

**38** "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

**39** At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, **40** where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. **41** When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. **42** In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! **43** But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? **44** As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. **45** Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

A recent Meta-Gallup poll found that 1 in 4 adults around the world reported feeling either very lonely or somewhat lonely. The largest percentage was among young adults aged 19 to 29 at 27%. The smallest percentage was among older adults aged 65 and older at 17%. Another report by the U.S. Surgeon General said that loneliness is literally killing our country with social media, which was intended to help us connect but is actually doing just the opposite.

Dr. Olivia Remes, a mental health researcher at the University of Cambridge said, "Human beings need social connections to thrive, and being embedded in

strong supportive networks can protect our wellbeing when we're faced with difficulties in life.”<sup>3</sup>

As we continue to answer the question, how does a weary world rejoice, we will find that part of the answer comes through finding joy in our connections with others. So I want to dive into the encounter we just read between Elizabeth and Mary and look at several aspects. First there is deep connection between these two people who were very different from one another. Next we see how important it is for us to building community with those who can lift us up when life turns sour. Finally we will look at some characteristics of this kind of generative or life giving community.

So first, let's look at this connection between Elizabeth and Mary. Notice that the moment Mary learned that she would become pregnant and bear a son, that she immediately got ready and hurried to see her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth was much older than Mary and no doubt had a reputation for being particularly hospitable.

When you have any sort of news that's worth sharing, who do you run to share it with?

In our family, it is Karen's Aunt Kit. She is the one who is currently battling ALS. But Aunt Kit will not only reflect your joy, but she will magnify it. Make it greater. And if it is sorrow, she will deeply empathize with it, and somehow make it lighter. These kinds of people in our lives a true gifts from God. And if we don't have those kinds of people around us, then become one.

Elizabeth must have been that kind of person to Mary. If anyone could have understood what it was like to be visited by an angel and told that they would miraculously conceive when it seemed impossible, it would have been Elizabeth. Mary would also have known Elizabeth's own amazing conception story.

For Mary, getting to Elizabeth's small village of En Kerem in the hill country of Judah was no small feat. En Kerem was about four miles to the west of Jerusalem and then ninety miles to Nazareth from there. So this was a several day journey by foot, over treacherous and dangerous terrain. But despite the barriers, Mary hurried off.

Now let's point out something that may not be obvious. Elizabeth and Mary were very different people. Elizabeth was much older, beyond the childbearing years. Mary was just a young girl, maybe thirteen or fourteen.

We don't know much about the town that Elizabeth was from. We do know that it was near Jerusalem which would have been convenient since her husband Zechariah was one of the temple priests. Nazareth was much further way from Jerusalem and had a gritty, blue collar feel to it. It was a town that was looked

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor Nicioli, "The loneliness epidemic: Nearly 1 in 4 adults feel lonely, new survey finds" on CNN Online, October 24, 2023.

down upon by others. In fact, shortly after Jesus began calling his first disciples, one person named Nathaneal commented about Jesus of Nazareth, “Nazareth? Can anything good come from Nazareth?”<sup>4</sup>

We also learned last week, that Zechariah and Elizabeth were part of the righteous ones. The Tsaddiks is what they were called. Tsaddik is Hebrew for righteous. She was upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly.<sup>5</sup> Despite that people assumed her infertility was due to some unrighteousness, we know that she had done nothing wrong to deserve it.

We also know that Elizabeth was married to Zechariah when she had become pregnant. Mary, on the other hand, was not married to Jospheh at this time. They were only engaged to be married. If people thought badly of Elizabeth who had done no wrong, just imagine the hostilities they might have expressed toward Mary who was young, unwed, and pregnant. Perhaps that is why Mary escaped Nazareth for a while to let the temperature cool down.

If anyone had the right to look down at Mary’s situation, it was Elizabeth. But she did not. We see how she welcomed Mary and her unborn child fully into her home. Mary’s circumstance was in God’s hands, not Elizabeth’s. So she didn’t feel compelled to judge her otherwise.

And what welcome it was!

Notice that when Mary greeted Elizabeth, it was a full body, joy filled experience. Even the unborn child in Elizabeth’s womb felt Mary’s greeting both being filled with the Holy Spirit.

“In her book, *Atlas of the Heart*, researcher Brene Brown defines joy as ‘an interesting feeling of deep spiritual connection, pleasure, and appreciation.’<sup>6</sup> She says joy is ‘characterized by a connection with others, or with God, nature, or the universe.’<sup>7</sup>

Consider a time when you experienced deep joy? Who or what did you feel connected to? When have you experienced contagious joy?”

Not only was Elizabeth non judgmental, but she was also affirming and full of grace. She encouraged Mary that the child growing in her was from God. Can you

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<sup>4</sup> John 1:46

<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:6

<sup>6</sup> Brene Brown, *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience* (New York: Random House, 2021). 204.

<sup>7</sup> Brown, *Atlas*, 205.

imagine how Elizabeth's words of blessing would have encouraged Mary as opposed to discouraged her when she needed it most?

Not only this, but Elizabeth was generous. Extremely generous by inviting Mary to stay with her for the last three months of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Maybe Mary was a help for Elizabeth as the last moments of pregnancy got more difficult. Or may even yet, she helped Elizabeth during labor as John the Baptist was born.

Folks, we want to be around people like Elizabeth. I want to be around Elizabeth. Do you have an Elizabeth in your life? On the flip side, is God calling you to be an Elizabeth to someone today who needs our support and encouragement?

Next we see how important it is to build up a community Elizabeths who can cheer us on and lift us up when life turns sour.

At Cascades, we are an intergenerational community of faith. We value sharing life with one another, even though we might be part of different generations. When we celebrate baptisms, we joyfully welcome these little ones in our loving community and acknowledge that we will play a part in their faith development. This is also why we don't shuffle our children away to separate children's programs during worship. While that might make it easier for us parents, it doesn't allow the rest of us to be blessed by the children's presence. We want them here with us. We love to see them dance down the aisles. We cherish their little noises. How else will they learn to grow up into adult Christian worshippers? By doing it with us.

In January Janet Lind and Karen Montovino are going to re-spark our Prayer Partner ministry which kind of lost its steam during COVID. Our Prayer Partner ministry connects children in the congregation with other caring adults who will get to know them, pray for them, and cheer them on as they grow up in the faith. It's yet another crucial adult touch point in a young person's life.

My prayer partner is Sam Hartrim-Lowe. When we started, I was much taller than Sam. But now Sam towers me. I have loved the opportunity to be connected to him over the years and watch him become the outstanding young man that he is. I love his passion for farming and his kind heart. And it makes me so glad to hear him lead us on the drums for worship. Thank you Sam for picking me!

If you are interested in enrolling your child in the program or interested in becoming an adult prayer partner, talk to either of them after worship today. You will get out of it what you put into it. Maybe God is calling you to step into a life giving relationship with someone younger than you today!

I loved Sarah Ostrand's story about why she is so passionate and intentional about building community with people who are different from her. Not only does she do this with Junior High and High school students, but as we heard, she also creates community with Seniors. Both people that our society says we should just

tuck away, forget about, and not deal with. But she says, NO! She knows by experience that these folk have so much to give to God and to others.

And finally, what characteristics might form these life giving and joyful connections with others? They are welcoming and hospitable. They are humble and non judgmental. They are encouraging. They are forgiving, yet accountable. They foster faith formation and are full of the Holy Spirit. They are joyful and connect with one another. They are generous. They bring peace to us and others. And most especially they reflect God's love to one another and to everyone they meet.

So how does weary world rejoice? Through sharing deep spirit filled connections with one another like those shared by Elizabeth and Mary and by participating in life giving communities like Cascades.

So if we are feeling particularly weary this Advent season, maybe God is inviting us to dive more deeply into our community at Cascades and be more intentional about searching for more meaningful connections with others. As we do, maya thrill of hope surprise us and cause our weary souls to rejoice.

Amen.