

SLIDE – boy hiding under bed

When our boys were little and my husband and I were gone evenings at different churches we had a wonderful person who acted as Grandma for our boys, Grandma Maurine. She was full of good play. When we could come home before their bedtime they often would be hiding from us in the house. They could hardly contain their excitement for the moment when they would be found. They wanted so much to surprise us. We would gladly play along. “Where are the boys? You mean they are not here? Where could they be?” We gladly played along just to see their reaction on being found. These were times of pure joy.

SLIDE – the annunciation – angel visits Mary

The gospel story begins in the middle of a story. Mary has run to Elizabeth after receiving the news of her shocking pregnancy. What do you do when you are visited by an angel and told that you will carry a child who will be the Son of the Most High God? What do you do when you hear that you are favored by God but from what you have always understood a pregnancy prior to marriage could end the plans and marriage contract? What do you do when you suddenly find yourself in a position of disgrace having no privilege or powers to lean on? What do you do when you hear that God wants to work through you? You run to a relative who has had experience with life. You run to someone who also has known disgrace. You run to someone who has recently also been the focus of God’s surprising activity. Mary runs to her cousin Elizabeth.

SLIDE – the visitation – Mary and Elizabeth

Elizabeth was an older woman also acquainted with disgrace. She and her husband Zechariah had lived into old age without ever having children. Elizabeth bore the weight of that circumstance in the culture of that time. The disgrace fell on her. However, Luke’s narrative opens with a messenger of the Lord visiting Zechariah, telling him that God, for whom nothing is impossible, will open the pathway to fertility and gestation for this older couple, and they will have a son. This son, who will be named John, will play a special role in turning the partner people of God, those with a fraction of faith, toward the Lord their God. The news of this turn of events was so shocking to Zechariah he could not believe it, so the messenger struck him mute and God’s plan quietly began to take shape within a vulnerable human womb. God uses the surprising location of a barren woman’s

womb to once again act among God's partner people to make God's dream come true.

The unborn John does a back flip of joy inside of his mother Elizabeth when Mary arrives. Martin Luther thought that Mary was only days along in the pregnancy when she went to her older cousin so that she would not have looked like she was with child. It was the work of the Holy Spirit that revealed the presence of the divine growing inside of Mary. It is as if John, in utero, then passes on the Spirit to his mother, for Elizabeth exclaims to Mary, "Blessed are you among women!" The joy expressed by Elizabeth was deafening. The text in Greek is redundant giving voice to Elizabeth's excitement. "She cried out loudly with a great shout!"

Elizabeth could not contain the excitement which was growing within her. She and Zechariah were joined in an incredible trust walk with God as the baby to be name John grew inside her. God was working the impossible through them. But now another surprising thing is taking place, her younger cousin Mary is also with child, and Elizabeth now recognizes that this pregnancy, too, is part of God's action to mend the universe. God is finding faithful partners in unlikely places. God works with those from the poor hill country and not people with position and power from the towers of influence. God is choosing humble partners and creating faith and trust within them so that they might bear the message of salvation to the world.

No longer is Elizabeth disgraced. No longer is Mary disgraced. Instead the merciful God has shown both of them favor and they are blessed. This signals that the people of God, the partners in God's endeavors, are no longer forgotten, no longer be forced to live under foreign rule, no longer sitting in anticipation of the Lord's coming. The Lord is present. The promise has been fulfilled.

SLIDE – Quote of Psalm 103 – The Lord executes righteousness and justice

The author of the gospel of Luke seems to be aware of the problem of speaking of God's plan to mend the universe in a world captivated by systems of power and influence. God has a history of listening to those who have little economic or political power but who have hearts ready to trust in the One True God. God has a history of working through unlikely characters. God has a history of renewing the covenant promises of old in new ages. God has a history of lifting up ways of righteousness and mercy again and again in order to advance the truth that God has provided enough for all.

This fall the rostered leaders of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin were invited to sit at the feet of a contemporary scholar of the gospel of Luke, Dr. Amy Lindeman Allen. Lindeman Allen called the original audience of the gospel urbanites, those less familiar with the Jewish faith, and those with wealth. Lindeman Allen described two major themes in the beginning of Luke, one being the central place of the Holy Spirit breaking into people's lives to create faith, and the second being a preference for social justice. God is replacing an economy of scarcity and competition with an economy of generosity in which all have enough. What are we to do with the words that Mary proclaims as she gives voice to God's way?

SLIDE – The poor

Mary gives voice to the hope that God will act in both mercy and justice in the world. Her words tell of a reversal of fortunes for all. Lindeman Allen told us that in the day of Jesus the economy looked different from our time. We are used to living in an era where there is a middle class in society, although the middle has shrunk in recent years. In Bible times a middle class did not exist. There were people of privilege and wealth, and there were the poor. Lindeman Allen says God's concern was for the disenfranchised poor, the poorest of the poor, those for whom the bottom has already fallen out. They are the ones who cry out to God for help. Lindeman Allen's teaching compliments other studies of the scriptures which recognize God's hand in actions which call for change that creates friendship with God, friendship with other people, and friendship with creation.

SLIDE – The homeless

St. John's has a history of creating a reversal of fortunes for those most in need. Since 1978 St. John's Apartments has been a refuge for those who find themselves without a place to call home. But more than a home, the apartments have become a place where relationships are formed and a community exists. It has become a place where people who have suffered disgrace can have their lives turned around. Many who have lived in the apartments talk about being blessed, being given the gift of incredible kindness. But the blessings do not simply travel in one direction. Those who serve the people find they can be incredibly blessed as relationships develop. Just ask Marlo, or any of the board, or staff at the apartments.

It is like the gift that Mary received from Elizabeth when her life turned upside down. Elizabeth, too, received blessing from the relationship with Mary. The scripture tells us Mary stayed with her for weeks. We all can feel blessed by the people God has put into our lives, rich or poor, proud or needy, powerful or lowly.

SLIDE – fill the hungry with good things (hold this until I leave the pulpit

The way of God is described once again in Luke's telling of the gospel. It is a story of power and reality, Justice and love, faith and freedom, truth and suffering, purity and hope. It is a story of relationship and connection. It is a story of surprising locations for the grace and mercy of God to appear. It is a story that is heard deeply by those who cry out to God and those whose hearts are transformed to be vessels of God's righteousness and mercy.

From the very beginning God has had a vision of a people and a world where there are provisions and mercy in abundance, where no one has too much, and no one has too little, but where all have enough. It is a vision where all people bring something to the relationship that is valuable to the whole of the world. It is a vision where stark divisions end and tender compassion rules the day. The next surprising location is simply ready to be seen with the eyes of faith.