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## How Does a Weary World Rejoice? We Are Connected

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One of the lessons I have learned many many times in ministry is that the time and place that God shows up to invite us into God's work in the world is unexpected. Here's an example: Before I made my way south of the river, I worked at a small church in Bloomington. There was one mom there, who routinely got up in my chili about the way I went about my work. Well, one spring, I released the summer schedule and it included the end of a summer-stretch program. If you don't know what those are, they are a program where you can drop your kids for a certain amount of time. In church-staff-lingo it is cheap daycare. Well, I was hoping to be more targeted with my time, so I ended the program and that was a huge problem for this parent.

I was standing in the office making some copies of instructions for the mud volleyball game we were running that night when she came into the room and said, "so I saw you ended the summer program. What else do you plan to end here?" I had one of those moments in my head where I was like, "uh oh. She's mad because I ended a tradition" She went on, "you do know that some families depend on that program for help with their kids." So, then I thought, "this is about childcare." I responded with, "my heart around this change is to create more quality time with kids around intentional activities."

She considered it a minute, and then another, and that is when the tears came. She said, "it's so hard for my daughter to make friends. And it hurts me so much as a mom. This has always been a place she could connect." That's when it dawned on me that it wasn't about tradition. It wasn't about childcare. This was about a mom caring for her kiddo. So, I was still holding everything I was printing. I was a little frozen in place, you know? I put it all down. I crossed the room. I sat down with her and listened to how difficult the start of middle school had been for their family.

Talk about unexpected opportunity for ministry. I'm sure I'm not the only one who has been in that

kind of a moment in time or in life. All of us have been going about our day and then all of a sudden God answers that prayer we pray sometimes, you know the one, "here I am God, send me!" but it is to a situation and time that we did not have on our dream board.

That is the kind of situation Mary and Elizabeth find themselves in when we catch up with them in our reading for today. Let's read it and then get to what it has to say about our unexpected moments when God chooses to use us in profound ways.

Luke 1:24-45

*Soon afterward his wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant and went into seclusion for five months. "How kind the Lord is!" she exclaimed. "He has taken away my disgrace of having no children." In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!" Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!" Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin." The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. For the word of God will never fail." Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her. A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth*

*gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, "God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said."*

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

How's that for unexpected: It's a boy! This reading is so important for our understanding of the Christmas story and yet we often skip it. You see, Israel is a people living on a prayer, and that prayer is that God would step into time and space to renew, restore, and reconcile them as God's people. The leading edge of that prayer is the expectation that there would be a messiah to lead that work. The whole community is praying that prayer, including Elizabeth, Zechariah, Mary, and even Joseph. But again, it's one thing to pray that prayer for other people, or to give intellectual ascent to it, but it's a whole other situation when it's your womb and your baby. There Elizabeth is, being called to be the mother of John the Baptist. And there Mary is called to be the mother of Jesus. And there they are trying to sort out what it all means for their lives. I can't imagine the pressure and the weightiness of it all. That's when God would remind them that the way to do that important work is together.

Friends, the same is true with us. God isn't done fulfilling promises and using you to make a difference in the world. While you may not be carrying the Christ child, you are carrying the spirit of Christ and as such you are just as much a bringer of good news and God's power as Mary and Elizabeth. Believe that. Trust it.

And in this season, that is especially true, and I know you know it. Here at the church and every church, there isn't a time in the year when the prayer request list grows more than right now. There isn't a time in the year when requests in the mission outpost are greater than right now. There isn't a time in the year when interest in the grief group are greater than right now.

Where that intersects with your life and the story of Mary and Elizabeth is in this question: how will

you prepare to respond when God unexpectedly nudges you into ministry? When you have your copy room moment like I had so many years ago. I think Mary and Elizabeth's story give us a simple, but life-changing pattern we can follow. It isn't a recipe for getting something like the results you want. It is a faithful way of being to let God's wants to get done. Sometimes those are different things. So, let's learn from their story:

### **Availability – Ask God to use and guide your life in this season.**

Remember that prayer I talked about a bit ago? This is the season to pray that prayer. Let's say it together, "here I am God, send me!" Something I think we often believe about what happens with that prayer is that it looks like you being called to some country far, far away or to only a certain kind of people. I call them "mission goggles." It's simple, look right at me, now put your hand right here in front of your nose. Notice the people you don't see? Mission Goggles.

When we look at the story, we find Elizabeth and Mary making themselves available. Absolutely, they would have participated in regular communal rhythms of worship and expectation, but right in those moments, what do we hear them say? Let's look at Mary's story: Gabriel comes to her, breaks the news, and we see the whole range: first she is nervous, to which the angel says, do not be afraid. Then, understandably, she's curious, "how is this gonna work?" but finally, she is available, "*I am the Lord's servant,*" Mary answered. "*May your word to me be fulfilled.*" Then, on to her aunt's house she went.

### **Mobility – Be willing to go out of your comfort zone to reach who God calls you to reach.**

In my early years of youth ministry, I suffered from a common block that many youth workers deal with: I was afraid of the parents. It really wasn't until I was a parent myself that I really began getting over that in a way that I would really lean-in to those kinds of interactions.

That exchange in the office with that mom was one of those moments where I had to be willing to be mobile. That is, to cover some ground between me and this mom so that I could really understand her situation. It was, as those kinds of things are, uncomfortable.

Again, Mary shows us the way. The big ask of Gabriel to her was to go to her Aunt Elizabeth's house. Don't forget the logistics involved. First of all, she was pregnant and had to cover this ground by walking. Second, and more importantly, don't forget how she got pregnant. She would have risked a lot in that culture walking around town with a baby bump. But she moved from her place of availability, to an actual practice of mobility and she covered the ground between her and the person God called her to minister to.

You are going to be asked to cover some ground. Often it isn't to some far-off place, but between you and your uncles' political views. It is the emotional space between you and your family members you haven't been talking to. It is the space created by grief as all of those memories of loved ones who have died come flooding into your family. and certainly, it will include you physically moving to be with others in our community so that they might experience God's presence in you.

**Presence – Let go of being God and embrace Christ within you.**

The first lesson in the first book I had to read in my Clinical Pastoral Education course in seminary was that I don't have to be a savior. I'm here to tell you that you don't either. You don't have to be some super-idealized, wise, and infallible provider of pastoral care. You don't need to be any more than who God has created you to be. Of course, as is the case for me, there are times when our best move is to connect the people we are sent to with folks who are gifted and trained in certain areas. Can I get two claps for all of the human service providers in the room today?

But, as for you, what you are being called to be is present. One of the most beautiful parts of the story is that the two moms were so surprised at the way the boys hopped around in their womb. It's one of those "This is Us" moments in the Bible. As I said earlier, you may not be carrying the Christ child, but you are carrying Christ's spirit. We are not being called to be the Messiah, we are being called to carry His spirit and to be present. This whole season is a celebration of Jesus Incarnation, or God's becoming one of us. It is connected to the big bible story we talked about earlier: God has come to the neighborhood, right? You have Jesus'

Spirit in you. You carry it wherever you go. So, your being in the room, beyond what skills you might bring there, is less about what you can do, and more about the reality that you are witnessing to: God's life-giving, death-beating presence in the world today.

Seven years ago, I went to the graduation party of that then middle schooler. Her mom was there and as I was putting a card into the bin of cards on the table, she gave me a great big hug and said, "thank you for being there." Friends, I didn't do anything special. I just chose to be available—ready to answer the call to care for this family. I was mobile—active in covering the distance that was mine to cover, and present—I was actually there for that family. All things you can do, too.

That last point is important because this entire season of advent and Christmas that follows are about Incarnation, connecting the reality that animated Mary and Elizabeth's story so many years ago. The Christmas story isn't good advice, it is good news. If the presence of one person can make such a difference, then, then why can't the presence of thousands of people carrying the real and empowering spirit of Christ do even more? Do you ever think about the joy we can bring when we connect with one another?