



CHURCH of  
the SAVIOUR

## ***“Seeking Sanctuary”***

***December 19, 2021***

*Luke 1:39-55*

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When you have big news to share, who is the first person you want to tell? Go ahead, say who it is out loud. A parent, a spouse or partner, a sibling, a best friend, a colleague. In my experience, I find that it depends on what the big news is about. Typically, my husband is the first person I share big news with but sometimes I tell my brother, Brian, first. We have always been close so some things I will share with him first. In our scripture passage today we see Mary traveling to Elizabeth to share some big news.

Our scripture narrative today begins with Mary hurrying to the Judean hillside to be with her relative, Elizabeth. Why did she make that journey? Let's look a few verses back to set the stage. Luke 1:26-33 reads “When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. When the angel came to her, he said, “Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!” She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. The angel said, “Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom.”

Mary was engaged to Joseph. In ancient Jewish society, engagement was the first step in a two-step marriage process. Engagement was a legal binding agreement between two families. The engagement gave the man marital rights over the woman, meaning that any sexual involvement of the woman with other men could be punished as adultery. You will note that it did not work the opposite way, with the woman having rights over the man if he had sexual involvement with another woman. Once the engagement was agreed upon, the woman would continue to live with her parents for a year or so until she was formally transferred to her husband's family home. In this angelic encounter, Mary is presented with the information that she, a virgin, will miraculously conceive a child through the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary, the one engaged to Joseph. Mary, the one still residing at home. Mary, the one who is now subject to the punishment for adultery, despite that not being the case. The punishment for adultery by Jewish law included the possibility of the death penalty, stoning, and other violent means of punishment. Scripture has precedent for the stoning of women who committed adultery. We see in John 8:1-11 the story of a woman who was about to be stoned for adultery, but Jesus stepped in and saved her. With all of that in mind, is it any surprise she decided to leave town? Wouldn't you, too? Home would not have been a safe place for her so she sought out safe refuge and sanctuary. She sought out her relative, Elizabeth, who also was pregnant through miraculous means.

Mary immediately traveled to be with Elizabeth. And the greeting and welcome that Mary received was joyous! Elizabeth proclaimed “God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her.” We do not know if Mary actually announced her pregnancy to Elizabeth out loud, but Elizabeth knew without a shadow of a doubt that God was at work. Elizabeth warmly and joyously greeted Mary. This was the type of greeting Mary needed. Elizabeth blessed Mary with her words and created a place of safety and welcome. Mary would remain with Elizabeth and Zechariah for three months.

Elizabeth's gracious response to Mary reveals that we all need safe spaces to process our lives and the things that happen. Mary had just received groundbreaking, life-changing news. Her home was not going to be a safe place to process this news, but Elizabeth was a safe refuge. Elizabeth's welcome and provision of safe refuge opened the way for Mary to be her full and true self. We all can be our full and true selves when we are in a place that is welcoming, safe, and secure. Who is your Elizabeth? Who or what has been a place of welcome, safety, and sanctuary for you? This place of love and welcome resulted in a glorious expression of praise, known as the Magnificat, or Mary's song. I love the CEB translation of verses 46-47: “With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my Savior.”

This was not just lip service and hollow words but praise that arose out of the very depths of her soul. Mary is rejoicing in who God is and what God has done.

Mary's song highlights God's mercy and favor. Mary marvels at the fact that God would show favor to someone like her, someone who was poor and lowly by her society's standards. Stepping into the role of a prophet, Mary reveals God's heart and love for the poor, oppressed, disenfranchised, the outcast, and the downcast. We see God overturning society in favor of the oppressed. This mighty reversal of power and status is nothing less than revolutionary. God is upsetting the ranks and showing just how faithful God is to the promises God makes.

We see God operating in three revolutionary ways: moral, social, and economic. First, a moral revolution. "He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations." The Book of Proverbs has a lot to say about pride, particularly its destructive nature. Pride is an inordinately lofty view of our own importance and superiority. We have seen a lot of prideful behavior in society. The problem is that pride looks to oneself and not the other. This stands in stark contrast to the posture of humility God desires us to have as Christians. Mary affirms that God will set these people aside. They will be scattered and dispersed, being humbled by God for their sinful, prideful thoughts and actions. Second, a social revolution. "He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly." Those who wielded the power in unjust ways are being humbled and brought low. Their days of tyranny are over. In return, those who suffered under these unjust rulers are being liberated and given agency and power. God is leveling the playing field and dismantling the social constructs we have put in place, particularly those that have been destructive and damaging. Finally, an economic revolution. "He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed." Those who have taken and taken without giving anything away to the poor are being given a taste of their own medicine. Those who have been overlooked and turned away are finally being filled. God is a God of abundant resources and God sees the need of God's people. God has filled the hungry with good things. God expects us to join in feeding the hungry and meeting the needs of those around us.

You will notice that most of the actions listed here are in past tense. Mary is expressing what God has already done. This does not mean that God has stopped acting and stepped out of the picture. Rather these verses serve as powerful reminders of God's faithfulness and action in the plight of humanity. It speaks the truth that God remembers God's promises. It reminds us that God looks upon us with favor and love and is already at work even when things feel like they could not get any worse. God is merciful, strong, righteous, and just. God comes to the aid of God's people and never turns a blind eye to our suffering. Blessed and happy are we who believe that the Lord will fulfill the promises God makes to us. God is not finished yet. Mary's song should compel us to continue working for a just, equitable world. To shake down the power that has been unfairly grasped and wielded for far too long. To dismantle racism. To affirm and include our LGBTQ siblings. To welcome the refugee and the immigrants. To build longer tables and put out more chairs. Mary's boldness inspires us to be bold. Mary's faithfulness inspires our faith. God is already at work. Will we join God in this work of redemption, reconciliation, and renewal?

Mary believed that God would fulfill the promises made to her. That faith and trust lead Mary to offer glorious, joyous praise of God her Savior. The task ahead of her would not be easy. Did she know the full extent of what laid before her? Probably not, but she confidently and boldly accepted God's plan. She would have the unique role of being the *Theotokos*, or God-bearer. She would have a significant role in the life of Jesus, one that we often overlook as Protestants. Mary was Jesus' first earthly home. She was a place of safety and sanctuary, all the while God being a place of safety and sanctuary for Mary. The Incarnation reveals that God has a desire to dwell with God's people. God does not remain in some distant heaven as far removed from us as possible. Through Jesus Christ we see that there is nothing God will not do in order to be with God's people. Idol gods worshipped in that time would never deign to get that close to humanity, to enter into the chaos and dwell within a body and live the whole human experience. But the True God did because God loves us immensely, fiercely, and deeply. God made a home among us in Jesus and continues to dwell within us through the power of the Holy Spirit. We are God's dwelling place. God fills us with love, joy, peace, and hope. God is our safe refuge, our sanctuary. In God we find true home.

I imagine most of us are familiar with the song "Mary Did You Know?" I will admit that it is not one of my favorites but I understand the sentiment behind it. There is yearly debate on social media over whether or not Mary actually knew all the things listed in the song. We love spending our time on productive, useful tasks, don't we? I found a rewrite this year that I believe speaks to the heart of the Magnificat and God's love, which I will share with you in closing. The lyrics are by Jennifer Henry.

*Mary did you know, that your ancient words would still leap off our pages?  
Mary did you know, that your spirit song would echo through the ages?  
Did you know that your holy cry would be subversive word?  
That the tyrants would be trembling when they know your truth is heard?  
Mary did you know, that your lullaby would stir your own Child's passion?  
Mary did you know, that your song inspires the work of liberation?  
Did you know that your Jubilee is hope within the heart  
Of all who dream for justice, who yearn for it to start?  
The truth will preach, the drum will sound, healing for the pain.  
The poor will rise, the rich will fall. Hope will live again.  
Mary did you know that we hear your voice for the healing of the nations?  
Mary did you know, your unsettling cry can help renew creation?  
Do you know, that we need your faith, the confidence of you.  
May the God that you believe in be so true.*

Glory and thanks be to God now and forevermore. Amen.