

Dec 23, '18, Anthon UMC, "Two Women: One Mission, Luke 1:39-45
Pastor Sheryl Ashley

"It was in the 6th month" that the angel appeared to Mary to tell her the startling news that she was about to become the mother to the long-expected Messiah. Even she was shocked that after all this time God would choose her, but being a faithful Jewish girl she did not hesitate to agree to do her part in this impossible task God was bringing to pass and who knows what part we will play in it?

This "in the 6 month" tip-off tells us that this birth story did not start with Mary. God's clock was already ticking when the angel came to Mary. Just because God announces something to us doesn't mean it begins with us. When our prayers aren't answered in as timely a fashion as we would want, it may be that God is getting His ducks in a row so his perfect plan might be accomplished. Who knows what goes on behind the scenes when we pray for something to come to pass?

The world had heard nothing but silence from God for like 400 years about this promised Messiah, but they kept praying for him to come. Do not doubt it, God had been working on a plan to get the world into shape for the birth of his Son since we fell into sin. Politically the whole known world was under the rule of Rome, so for the first time, everyone was linked politically by one ruler and at peace whether they liked the way it was enforced or not. Also they were all linked by a common language for the first time since the tower of Babel incident. For the first time, the world was one. The stars were finally in alignment for what was about to come.

"And in the 6th month" of Elizabeth's pregnancy...this old barren woman's pregnancy, with the one who would be called "John the Baptist," her young cousin Mary became pregnant. Both women were pregnant out of normally accepted timing and out of

morally accepted expectations. One was too old and one was not married. Our Bible tells us that Elizabeth went into hiding for the first five months, probably avoiding the gossips. When Elizabeth went public, she proclaimed that God had taken away her disgrace. Mary was just about to find out what being disgraced really felt like. The two women were both curiously out of the world's timing, but perfectly in to God's timing.

For Mary disappearing rather than trying to explain a private angelic visit and an immaculate conception pregnancy even to her parents, and Joseph, or anyone in the small community of Nazareth, leaving was a wise move. She was not the first woman pregnant out of wedlock who disappeared for a while from the prying eyes of those who would wonder at a virgin's morning sickness.

With the amazing news from the angel that her cousin Elizabeth had conceived and was already 6 month pregnant, Mary knew instinctively her cousin's was where she was to go. It was like the angel had put a bug in Mary's ear with that news and she acted on it.

Where do you go when no one else understands you or what you are going through? You find someone who accepts you – a relative is best of all or someone who is experiencing what you are experiencing, A.A. or a Cancer Support Group are two that meet in our safe space for understanding and no judgment. You find someone who is experiencing what you are experiencing; misunderstanding, gossip, confusion, but both women knew their mission was God ordained and both had faith that God would get them through. Elizabeth knew God was using her for a special mission as did Mary...what a bond that knowledge must have made!

They were two women on one mission, and that mission was to give birth to the light-bearers of the Kingdom of God on this earth. Both women were so happy to be chosen for a God-ordained pregnancy, no matter what the world thought. Why Elizabeth's baby even jumped in her womb when the newly pregnant Mary approached. Now Elizabeth's baby, John, was at the age when babies do start to kick in the womb. But perhaps it was an unborn baby that first recognized Jesus Christ. Maybe it was a regular womb kick that Elizabeth felt but she attributed it to God and the Bible records it that way. And it also records that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit at the sound of Mary's greeting. She calls Mary "blessed" and she calls Mary, "the Mother of my Lord." What a title! If all the world scorned Mary, she would have these words to give her strength for the journey. At Elizabeth's response Mary bursts into song and the prophetic words of the Holy Spirit pour forth from her lips, praising and magnifying God and telling of the great things this child would do for the poor and for the lowly and all those who fear God. God had heard the cries of his people and the work of salvation had begun, "Joy to the World" through a little nobody, young and poor, from a town with a bad reputation, Nazareth. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" people would say of Jesus later.

The message here is, if God can use an old barren woman and a young unmarried woman to bring to this earth great men who would change the world, then surely if he so chooses, God can bring great things to birth in us if we are willing to pay the price. Oh yes, these babies would bring their mothers great pride and joy. But these same mothers would give birth in pain to their babies like all women, nurse them, change their diapers and wipe their noses, cuddle them when they skinned their knees, read to them out of the Torah, recite their prayers with them. I mean these were real mothers, who

would give their lives for their children, just as mothers would today. They knew things about their boys that no one else on the earth could know. And as their boys grew into men, they came to realize that those fleeting baby years were the only time they would know peace and be able to protect them from danger. When the young men hit 12 they were undoubtedly thinking their own thoughts already. We know Jesus was not thinking his parents thoughts at age 12 at the temple when he stayed behind without telling his parents.

And then one day, John who had stayed in the wilderness came proclaiming the need for the people to repent and baptizing all sorts of people out in the Jordan River for the forgiveness of their sins. These two young men, John and Jesus, raised by two mothers of faith and hope met their mission with faith and hope. I can about guarantee you that when Elizabeth and Mary saw their sons all grown, these mothers looked with thankfulness to God that they had been allowed to give birth to such fine, fearless young men of God. And when the day came that each man carried out God's mission with a courage rarely seen before, the mothers must have felt fear and trembling at the dangers that would come to their sons who had spiritually linked arms at Jesus' baptism and stormed the world to bring the message of God's love and grace to those who sat in despair.

I am thinking that Elizabeth was old enough that she may have died and been spared such agony as knowing that her son, John, was jailed for defying Herod and had been beheaded for his speaking the unacceptable truth that Herod and Herodius were adulterous sinners.

But John had fulfilled his purpose and prepared the way for Jesus to come as the light of the world. John grew up to know his place. Elizabeth had known it from the beginning, for he was prophesied by John's own father that he was to be the prophet of the Most High. John never thought for a moment that he was anything else but a rugged prophet after the manner of Elijah, a forerunner of the Messiah, and that Jesus was the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, not he.

It was Mary who would live to see her own son, after achieving great honor and glory, suffer and die for the sins of the whole world. And even though she would also live to see the resurrection, what that cruel death did to her mother's heart none of us can know for certain, but Mary is honored to this day for birthing and raising that flesh and blood boy in whom God lived, in full force.

Elizabeth was faithful to her mission. Mary was faithful to her mission. They were a gift to each other. So God provides others to help us on our way to fulfill our mission, to encourage us, to mentor us with their wisdom. These women were there for each other at a most important time in their lives. Their mission was one and the same – to give birth to and to nurture truth bearers, light bearers. And as Elizabeth felt it an honor to befriend and encourage Mary when there was so little acceptance for this young woman chosen by God, so Elizabeth's son John also knew the honor of befriending and proclaiming his cousin Jesus to be the One they had been waiting for. God provides people along the way to come along side us and enable us to become the people God has called us to be. Look for them. They are there. And sometimes, they may be you!

I would guess that we could all say that we have been called to give birth to some greatness that is beyond ourselves, to give up our own comfort, in our old age, and in

our youth, to raise children and to nurture children, our own and the children of others who need our care and nurture as well as peers and adults whose lives need our nurture. Look at the cards on all the Christmas trees in our bank and other places of business where we were given an opportunity to bless some child or adult in need. If we have been paying attention there have been times when we were called to carry out plans that stretched our faith and ability further than we ever thought it could go. Perhaps taking on a responsibility in your family or in this church has stretched you to try a task you have not done before or to continue to faithfully do one you are getting weary of doing. But like Mary and Elizabeth, Jesus and John, we have not been expected to go this journey alone. If we have looked around and listened to those God has put in our lives, our brothers and sisters in Christ...if we have put ourselves in the position to receive their care and then put ourselves in the position to give it to someone else, we may in a way understand more fully what it means to be a partner in sharing a mission for God. All of us: one mission! Birthing the Kingdom of God on this earth. What could be more exciting on this the last Sunday of Advent?