

Ben Lattimer
Sunday Service, Sermon
December 10, 2023
On Luke 1
Strength in Numbers

Intro / Hook Story - Frodo and Sam (in the stories?)

“It’s like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes you didn’t want to know the end. Because how could the end be happy?”

Those are the words of Samwise Gamgee to his companion, Frodo Baggins...

There’s a lot of “*Lord of the Rings*” in the house these days. The twins just finished *The Hobbit* and Everett’s reading *The Two Towers*. These little Hobbits find themselves caught up in adventures with Dwarves and Elves - and Orcs and Dragons... Treading paths full of “darkness and danger... How could the end be happy?,” Sam asks. “How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened?”

Sometimes, these days, when I turn on the news, I find myself asking the same question...

Back to the Scripture

Our scripture this morning is such a familiar story. It might be Cindy’s favorite of the Advent season. These two pregnant women - one old and one young - coming together to support each other. They’re scared.

Let’s be honest - pregnancy is still scary - even when everything else is ordinary. It’s wonderful too! But it’s scary. But here, everything else is *extraordinary*. Visits from angels. An old woman and a virgin - now both pregnant.

Lisle Gwynn Garrety notes that we usually think of this story in terms of Elizabeth’s support to Mary. But maybe it goes both ways. Last week we wondered about Elizabeth’s own fears. How many times had she tried to become pregnant before? How many miscarriages?

Elizabeth had pulled away. Remained in isolation. Afraid of what people might say if they knew she was pregnant. Afraid of what they might whisper, if this pregnancy too failed to come to term. There is no shame in this - and yet we feel it all the same. In Elizabeth’s day all the more so.

Mary was scared too. Being young, unmarried, and pregnant made her incredibly vulnerable. But where Elizabeth pulled away - into isolation - Mary sought connection, and in so doing planted the seeds of joy for *both* women.

As Rev. Garrety writes, "Perhaps Mary's arrival is what pulls Elizabeth out of her seclusion, allowing her to experience joy and delight.... Even if they each cannot feel joy for *themselves*, they are both holding joy for each other. From that connection, joy grows."

Surround Yourself with People Who Lift you Up

Of course, there's more to it than just being together. There's something about these two women - something they bring to each other. It could have gone differently.

We all know what it's like when we're struggling, when despair for the world grows in us. Sometimes we get together and "vent". Except somehow, instead of venting the frustration *out* of the system - we spiral, feeding into each other's feelings, and walk away feeling MORE upset, not less. Or sometimes we get into "misery competitions." You know, "You think YOU'VE got it bad... Let me tell you what's going on for me." Usually we don't say those - we just think it, more aware of the difficulties of our own challenges.

On the other side of the coin, sometimes in our grief we encounter well-meaning folks who tell us to "cheer up," because "everything happens for a reason..." And there are times when that might be true, but when we're afraid, when we're broken... Well, that's little comfort.

Mary and Elizabeth don't descend into a "venting spiral" *and* neither do they offer each other "hollow platitudes". Instead, Mary and Elizabeth are the kind of people we hope to surround ourselves with.

They speak to the wonder of it all - they speak to the strangeness *and* the blessing of God's work in them. I imagine they are honest and *vulnerable*. And they are hopeful. Where each might be too afraid in the midst of their own experience - they see the blessing in the other - not just in the other's child, but in the other woman sitting across from them, brave and true - favored by God.

There's something in that. Sometimes others are able to see in us strength we have difficulty seeing in ourselves. Sometimes we can see and name it in others.

Good News...

The angel brought good news, even if it was hard to see in the moment - even if it seemed impossible. The truth is we are terrible at predicting the future. One of my mentors at the hospital - Bill - used to smile at me whenever I made what he called a "negative prediction."

"How are you at telling the future?" he'd ask... "Maybe it will come true. Maybe not."
The world is full of miracles...

We see the cycles of violence and war around us and think they will never end...
30 years ago, we all thought the violence in Northern Ireland would never end - and yet...

We see patterns of injustice that have lasted for generations and imagine they cannot be broken.

35 years ago, apartheid in South Africa seemed destined to last forever...

We know our own grief and brokenness, and imagine we will never be whole... And maybe that's true. Our grief may never diminish - the love we have lost will always hold its place. And yet - we may find in time that though the grief remains, our world beyond it somehow continues to grow, and we find there is room for joy alongside the sadness.

This is how a weary world begins to rejoice: even when we are too afraid to rejoice for ourselves... We come together. Not happy people helping sad people - but all of us broken and scared - helping each other. In connection we find joy, and hope beyond hope - learning to dream the impossible.

For as the angel says, nothing is impossible with God...

Lord of the Rings Reprise

"How could the end be happy?," Sam asks. "How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad [has] happened?"

"But in the end," he says, "Even darkness must pass. A new day will come.... Those were the stories that stayed with you... that meant something. Even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand. I know now. Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. *They kept going* because they were holding on to something.

"What?," asks Frodo. "What were they holding on to?"

"That there's some good in this world," Sam says, as he hoists Frodo back to his feet - to carry on once more. "That there's some good in this world, And it's worth fighting for."

Amen.