

Home Away From Home

^{NRS} Luk 1:39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

No matter how wonderful the people in our immediate families are, no matter how great our parents or our life partner are- there are just some things they can't give us. We put all of this pressure on this small circle of family we draw around us- and the truth of it is, we really ask too much from them. And every now and again we realize that no matter how great they are, even the best life partner or even the best parents- there are just some things, important things, they cannot give to us.

I learned this pretty early on. I know a while back I told you about going to my first dance in junior high. I told you how my mom convinced me that I would really stand out if I had just the right tie- how I wouldn't want to show up without one if everyone else was wearing one. And I told you about me showing up with a tie and walking into that school cafeteria turned torture chamber, and how she was absolutely right. The tie really did help me stand out. Not because it was so great- but because I was the only doofus wearing one.

I can now laugh when I think about that night. My favorite thing was how they all told us quite sternly how the boys and girls were to keep a certain distance between us as we danced- one of the coaches said he wanted to see daylight between us at all times. This was funny not only because it was night time, but because of how optimistic it was.

The entire night the girls stood around in these circles all facing inward. The boys had kind of lined up awkwardly along the perimeter, like gangly guards in clothes that were a size or two too big. Too much contact? Are you kidding me? We would have been lucky that night to be close enough to a girl to have eye contact with her, much less violate the daylight rule.

But as painful as the dance itself was, the more embarrassing moment actually came earlier. The hardest part for me was actually at the store when we bought the tie.

I realize in retrospect now how kind my mom was really being. We went to Dillard's to shop, which was normally too nice of a store. Normally we shopped for clothes at Penney's- it was kind of above Montgomery Wards but not quite as nice as Dillard's. So going to Dillard's was kind of splurging. So, I know she was really trying to do something really kind. But then when we were there looking at all these ties, and I have no idea why we didn't think about this before, but it suddenly occurred to us that this thing was going to have to be tied. I mean it is called a tie, after all. It's not like it should have been a surprise. But I remember standing at that counter, looking at the manikins with that intricate knot and asking my mom if she knew how to do that. And then seeing her expression realizing I was in trouble.

Well, the nice man attending to us tried to be helpful. He suggested maybe my father would be able to help. My dad had been gone for at least a year at that point. But I didn't feel like going into the whole story, so I told him I didn't think that was going to work. And he said that that was ok, that he knew just the thing. And then he went back into a little room, and he came back holding a small, plastic, white card- the size of a business card. And on the card were a series of complicated looking diagrams with

arrows and tiny little paragraphs of instructions you needed a magnifying glass for. I realized with a shudder that this little card that was suppose to teach you how to tie a tie, walking you through a both the half and full Windsor knot.

Well let me tell you if you have never learned how to tie a neck tie using a small, white, plastic card- it's as easy as it sounds. There's an episode of M.A.S.H. where Father Mulcahey was out in the field when a wounded soldier begins choking. And there are no doctors around, and so he has to call back to base. And Hawkeye, the chief surgeon, has to walk him through how to do a tracheotomy over the phone. With all due respect to Father Mulcahey- this was harder. I mean I have a hard time tying my shoes, some of you have noticed. A tie is whole other level. Tying a knot is really something you need to see. It's one of those things someone should show you. You should have someone standing behind you in front of a mirror, walking you through the process every step of the way.

But I didn't. I had a small, white, plastic card. And I was going to have a full evening ahead of me in front of a mirror trying to figure this thing out.

You know, sometimes the people closest to us, even when they are fantastic- they just aren't able to provide us with everything we need in life. Sometimes we have to pull in others to help.

Mary knew this. Mary knew all about this. See, Mary is just so amazing to me. When the angel comes to her, the story we heard last week, the story Nicole did such a great job with- when the angel tells Mary she's pregnant, we're not exactly sure how old

she is, but most scholars guess she's somewhere between 13 and 16. She was pregnant the same time the biggest crises in my life was trying to figure out how to tie a tie. Now, unless your parents are abusive, nearly every young person I know, if they got news like Mary's, overwhelming news that life as she knew it was over- most young people would turn to their mom or their dad for help.

But what does Mary do? Where does Mary go? This is what makes Mary so remarkable to me, when she hears this news, she knows instinctively that her family isn't going to be able to help her with this. And so she heads off alone and on foot into the Judean hill country, and she heads about 60 miles to a little town just outside of Jerusalem where the priests lived- she heads to Zechariah and Elizabeth. It's like she knows her parents, as great as they are, really aren't going to be able to help. And her fiancée, Joseph, he's a great carpenter, and she knows he's going to be a great father- but he's not going to be able to help her- not right now.

Now from the stories the early church tells, Mary was probably showing wisdom beyond her years by leaving home. In a very early work called the Protoevangelium of James we hear about Mary's mom and dad, Anne and Joachim. Anne and Joachim, like so many Old Testament couples, were unable to have children, and this was so upsetting to Anne, she lamented day and night. At an extreme moment, she strikes a bargain with God that if she is able to become pregnant, she will dedicate the child to serving God as long as they live. Well of course it's right after that that Anne becomes pregnant. And she makes good on her promise. Anne has Mary working in the temple before she's able

to crawl. And every day Anne tells Mary how special she is, how much her life is a gift, and how the girl must be an example of faith to everyone.

So then when Mary, no doubt nicknamed God-girl or something like that by her friends, becomes pregnant- it's not like just anyone getting knocked up here. It's Anne's little gift from God, the little girl who is supposed to be the model child, the girl who serves in the temple night and day. Mary probably didn't need to be a rocket scientist to figure out that her parents and her fiancée probably weren't the best people to help her through this. This didn't make them bad people- they just weren't going to be able to give her the care she needed at that moment.

And so Mary winds up rushing through the dangerous back roads of the Judean hill country. It's an enormous risk. It's not just that it's a long journey, but it's a dangerous one. There are bandits on the roads. There are Roman soldiers. There are a thousand things that could go wrong.

And it's a risk because Mary doesn't really know Zechariah and Elizabeth that well. The relationship between Elizabeth and Mary is an interesting thing. More traditional texts like the King James and the Jerusalem Bible refer to Elizabeth as being a cousin to Mary. And cousin is a pretty clear relational term- if they are cousins it means that Mary's mom or dad was a sibling to Elizabeth's mom or dad. Now, the technical word for cousin is *apsion*, but the word Luke uses here is *sungenesis*, which is a very broad term that's used to talk about not only literal family but people you feel close to. And this is why as we've uncovered more and more ancient manuscripts and we've learning more about the nuances of ancient Greek- every modern translation around from

the more mainline NRSV we heard this morning to the more evangelical NIV all back away from the word 'cousin' and translate this term more generally, saying Elizabeth and Mary are relatives. So given then, and given how far away Zechariah and Elizabeth live- it's likely that Mary had never even met Elizabeth.

So why on earth would she do such a thing? Why on earth would this girl not go to her parents or her fiancée and make this dangerous journey on her own. Why? Mary does all this, I think, because our need for blessing is just as basic as our need for food or water. Our need to be loved, to be held, for someone to look into our eyes and tell us that we matter, especially when life is hard, we will do almost anything for this. We will do almost anything to be blessed.

And talk about a great reception. As soon as she walks in Mary knows she's home. Elizabeth, who has shut herself away for months is filled with the Holy Spirit. The baby inside of her gives her a kick, and Elizabeth immediately welcomes Mary in and immediately gives Mary what she is so hungry for. She says: "Blessed are you among woman, Mary. And blessed is the fruit of your woman, blessed is the child growing inside of you, Mary." Can you imagine what this felt like for Mary? In the eyes of everyone else, in the eyes of her parents, her friends, in the eyes of passing strangers- she is a failure, an outcast. And the child growing inside of her is seen as a burden, a mistake- something to be ashamed of. But not to Elizabeth. Not to Elizabeth. She says blessed are you Mary. Blessed! And not just her but the child growing inside of her, too.

Do you know what I believe? I believe every single one of us is Mary. Every single one of us is hungry for blessing. Every one of us, no matter how normal we make ourselves seem- each of us here has some part, some facet of our lives, that doesn't quite fit in. And maybe it isn't quite as extreme as Mary, but each of us here has parts of ourselves we think if everyone knew about, if everyone could see- there's no way we would be welcome, or acceptable.

Now our challenge is to stop being so upset that our families, our partners, and the people closest to us, aren't always able to give us this blessing. They just aren't- and it doesn't make them bad people. It's just the way life is. And our challenge is to get over this. This is an especially great challenge during the holidays- when we're spending more time with family, or we're remembering time past. But our challenge is to accept them for what they are, and to spend less time being upset over what they can't give us, and to spend more time searching for and building community that is able to bless us.

But this text doesn't just challenge us- it fills us with hope, too. The hope of Mary is that there might be spaces like this, there might be communities like this, where we might come and bring our whole selves- the selves we're proud of, and the selves we hide away. And we can come as whole people and not only be welcome, but be blessed.

Here these words of poet of Galway Kinnell. I offer them not simply because they are a pig, but because in this poem we hear what it is to be blessed by another and what it can bring out in ourselves, especially when we're feeling unworthy:

The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;

though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;
as Saint Francis
put his hand on the creased forehead
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch
blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow
began remembering all down her thick length,
from the earthen snout all the way
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail,
from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine
down through the great broken heart
to the sheer blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking and blowing beneath them:
the long, perfect loveliness of sow.

Beloved, give thanks for your families this year. Even the ones that are hard to love. Ask yourselves what it might be like if you were able to love them for who they are, and let go the anger and hurt for what they are not, and never really could be. And may all of us, like sows unaware of our own beauty, seek out friends able to reteach us, in words and in touch, how lovely we really are. **Amen.**