Over the last couple of weeks, we have been reading scriptures connected to Elizabeth, Zechariah, and their son John the Baptist. Today we will read the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, reaching out to Elizabeth during a chaotic time for both.

Prior to our reading, the gospel writer Luke shares the stories of angels appearing to both Elizabeth and Mary and informing them that they will become pregnant. Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah are old when they receive this news and Mary is a young virgin.

In both encounters, an angel appears and tells them that they are blessed and are part of a larger story of salvation. Both women are told that though it may seem impossible, that with God all things are possible. Mary ends her encounter with the angel by sharing a bold and faithful statement that she is God’s servant and will trust in God’s plan for her.

This scripture from Luke that we will be reading this morning comes to us in two parts. In the first part, we will read the story of Mary and Elizabeth connecting with one another during their pregnancies. Mary is the young girl, most likely a teenager, and Elizabeth is the old woman. I am not going to offer a guess as to the age when a woman is classified as an old woman.

The second portion of this reading will be poetic words spoken by Mary which we commonly call the Magnificat. These will be words which challenge the status quo and affirm that Mary is more than a womb for the Son of God. Mary shows in her words that she is a strong voice that God chooses to use to share prophetic words of hope, promise, and a restructuring of society.

In fact, the second part of our Scripture today has been banned in parts of the world. These words have been banned at times from public liturgy in countries such as Guatemala, Argentina, and India because they give voice to the poor to challenge the rich in power.

Some Christians in the United States omit parts of this song because it lifts up the voice of a woman who is strong and prophetic. These words we will be reading are the longest set of words spoken by a woman in the New Testament.

**Read Luke 1:39-55 (Letarshia)**

There are many ways that we can interpret this story from Luke. We can read this story as an affirmation that God affirms women to express their own voice and to not be silenced by men. During this period in our history when many women in our culture are finding their voice to speak out against abuse and harassment, we can look to Mary as an example to affirm their courage.

Mary is called blessed and she shares words about how God is bringing down the powerful from their thrones. Certainly, words which challenge the male domination of the culture then and in our culture today. If one is looking for a theological basis for the “Me Too” movement, one can find it here in Mary’s words.

But this morning I want to focus on the importance of Mary choosing to reach out to Elizabeth. Why did she do this? Was this important? Why did Mary and Elizabeth need to see each other?

One way to read this portion of the story is as an affirmation of why we need partners on our spiritual journeys. Mary boldly proclaims before our reading that she is a servant of the Lord and is willing to follow God to wherever. But then the next scene shows Mary going with haste to visit with Elizabeth. Here together they find connection and they find community with one another.

We, too, need that same sense of connection and community to others in our Christian journey. Sometimes we offer connection and community well in the church and sometimes we do not. Sometimes people come into worship in this faith community and feel that sense of connection and community while others come in and do not feel that same sense of connection and community.

I receive weekly emails from an organization that offers advice to business executives. I find some of their advice helpful for the church and to me as a pastor. This week someone wrote in a question that is directly related to the church. Maybe you can relate to their question. They write:

**Dear Joseph,**

I attend a small church. One of our members sings at the top of her lungs and is very much off key. Always. She overpowers the rest of us. I have witnessed people plugging an ear or intentionally sitting farther away. It seems that something could or should be said to her.

Everyone wants to be loving and kind. No one wants to offend her. We want to embrace our members. I want her to enjoy her singing. How would you approach this situation?

Sincerely,

Silent in The Pew

**Dear Silent in The Pew,**

I’m going to take a leap since you use the word “church” and assume you worship in a Christian tradition. Please forgive me if my assumption is incorrect and translate what I say to your own faith.

My answer to your question depends on your answer to mine: *Why do you go to church?* What do you *really* want?

Before I elaborate, let me sympathize. I know what it’s like to feel persistent eruptions of judgment. I hate that feeling. I suspect everyone has some pet peeves that trigger an unpleasant cascade of irritation, resentment, and even anger.

I’ve learned something absolute about hot-flashes of judgment: *my judgments are always about me*.

Can this judgement of others happen at church? Yup. Could it be that your feelings about the woman’s singing are not just about the lack of musical quality, but are produced by judgments? Yup. It’s possible you’ll find relief by getting her to lower her volume. But you won’t find spiritual growth.

So why are you at church? Are you there for music appreciation? If so, by all means, have the conversation. If you’re there because you’re trying to learn to create a Christian community, then her pitch and volume might be the greatest gifts she could give to you.

Please don’t read me as self-righteous in what I’m about to say. This sermon is for me, and you’re welcome to listen in. When Jesus organized his small congregation, he first invited lepers with ghastly sores, hated tax collectors, scandalous adulterers, and, perhaps, even a bad singer or two.

His offer was to gather all those who were off-key in their own unique way and help them learn to be one. I think the harmony he was after began first with each learning that *their* judgments were *their* judgments—and wouldn’t be solved by fixing the other. They would be solved by receiving and then offering grace.

I suggest the best way to find the harmony and beauty you’re after is to ask yourself in those disturbing moments: What do I *really* want? Then raise your voice in glorious cacophony with your sister.

Best Wishes, Joseph

During this season of Advent and Christmas, I pray that we are focused on how we can be the supportive Mary to Elizabeth. How we can affirm that we are blessed by God in order to be a blessing to others.

We are not here to judge ourselves as superior to others whoever the other may be. Remember, God chose a young, unmarried, pregnant women to bring the Holy Child into the world.

Mary used this blessing to share powerful words and offer support to an older woman. God used this young, unmarried, pregnant woman to sing words that challenged the structures of power that favored the rich over poor and men over women.

This Christmas is an opportunity for us to count our blessings. Whatever they may be. And to then use these blessings to enrich connections and community. To challenge the domination found in the status quo.

As we seek to do that, then maybe we will also be able to affirm like Mary that our spirit is filled with joy. AMEN.

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