

Micah 5:2-5a
Psalm 80:1-7
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-55

Sermon December 23rd, 2018

God Lifts Us Up

Elizabeth and Mary have become cherished people within the Christian faith, but their journey didn't start out that way. Before angels appeared in their lives turning things upside down for them they were shamed in their communities.

Elizabeth couldn't bear a child. In this time period women were valued by their ability to have children. Those who were barren unfortunately were treated poorly by their relatives and neighbors.

Mary on the other hand became pregnant at a very young age, but in an unbelievable way while she was engaged to Joseph. A person who takes no part in her circumstance. Unfortunately, her neighbors and relatives shun her for being an adulterer.

So, here are Elizabeth and Mary, two people who are shamed in the communities they live in, and yet, become important beloved people in the Christian faith.

Mary the mother of Jesus, our messiah, our savior. Elizabeth the mother of John. The mother of a prophet. In fact, Jesus will go on to say that John is more valuable than a prophet.

This story is a powerful testament of how God can change us and our circumstances in miraculous ways. When I hear this story, I can't help but think of some of the people in my life who have experienced these transformations including myself.

For example, a relative of mine spent years struggling with a drinking addiction. His first marriage ended because of his addiction. When he was sober he ended up marrying a woman who also struggled with a drinking addiction. That marriage ended as well. For some, going through two divorces would have shattered them. But, something miraculous happened. He reconnected with his faith. Everyday he read his Bible. He became

active in the church. He was a totally different person. God took away his shame and breathed new life into him.

My story is a similar one as I spent a few years in my early adulthood struggling with addictions. I felt a lot of shame for my brokenness until I realized that God does love me and is forgiving and gracious. When that message finally cliqued in I felt empowered to walk away from my addictions and become quite involved in my faith. God took away my shame and breathed new life into me.

Turning back to Mary and Elizabeth, God takes away their shame and breathes new life into them. They are no longer shamed people living on the margins of society. They are examples of God's miraculous and unpredictable love for the world. A love that transforms the underdog into someone of significance. A love that chooses an elderly woman to be the Mother of John. A love that chooses an addicted young adult to become a pastor. A love that chooses a teenage girl to be the Mother of Jesus. We see this love being proclaimed in Mary's song of praise to God as she declares herself, a humble servant of God, and gives thanks for being lifted up.

The Holy Spirit is breathing in Mary and Elizabeth a prophecy to see that John will pave the way for Jesus who will flip this world upside down. Whose message will give hope to the poor and oppressed. Whose message will give hope to the sick. Whose message will empower women and children to speak. Whose message will empower paralyzed people to get up and walk. Whose message will empower those who struggle with addictions to feel liberated by God's love for them, freeing them from their addictions. Whose message will empower a carpenter to challenge the elites in the Empire and the Temple. Whose message will raise the dead. Whose message will take away our shame giving us new life.

But first, Jesus is coming in a manger in the middle of nowhere to reveal God's love to poor shepherds and barn animals. To challenge the Empire to be a society where a teenage girl and a barren elderly woman will be revered.

Like Mary and Elizabeth, like all those people who are impacted by the gospel message, we too, in the midst of our shame, hope in the messiah. Standing at the manger in solidarity with our shepherd friends, Mary, and

Joseph, longing to be changed by God's forgiving love. Longing for our communities and world to experience healing and redemption from the Empires that too often seem to impact us in negative ways. Causing us shame.

Today we lit the candle of love to remember that we are all loved in miraculous ways. To remember that God has taken away our shame. To remember that God has lifted us up through Christ Jesus. Giving us everlasting hope that no matter what shame we have carried with us, God's love prevails. God's love breathes new life into us.

Let us pray, loving God, when our shame brings us down, lift us up. Like your servants Mary and Elizabeth, give us hope to believe that your love takes away our shame. Freeing us to love others as you love us. **Amen.**