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Advent 1C
Peace, Seattle
December 2, 2018
Luke 1:39-55

FROM SHAME TO PRAISE

For two years, I never laid down at night without a shirt, pants, and shoes by my bed. As a houseparent in an apartment complex full of single, pregnant women, it was my job to be ready at all hours for the knock at the door that said, BABY ABOUT TO HAPPEN!

And when that knock came, it was my job to deliver that young woman to the hospital as safely and quickly as possible so she could deliver her baby into the world.

The apartments were a ministry of Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota, located in the heart of the Philips neighborhood in South Minneapolis, a rough part of town. But in spite of its location it was, for these young women, an oasis of sorts.

For most of them were from small towns in rural Minnesota, places where being single and pregnant evoked shame and consternation, and, for some, the demand that they leave home.

Shame is a powerful weapon.

In our gospel reading today we come face to face with two women—one married, the other single; one wed into privilege, the other living at the edge of poverty—who, for different reasons, are both subject to shame.

Luke begins his gospel by placing their stories in context, anchoring them to a particular time and place by offering specific detail about where powers resides: In Caesar Augustus who rules Rome; in Pontius Pilate who governs Judea; in Herod who rules Galilee.

Why this detail?

Luke anchors these stories in a specific political context because he wants us to know that this is not a fairytale that happened *"once upon a time";* that John and Jesus are not imaginary characters; that their appearance in Judea and Galilee are not aberrations but in fact had been foretold by prophets for centuries.

By tethering their stories in this way Luke helps us see how radically different than the status quo is the life to which they are calling us. And our gospel lesson today is a case in point.

In her book on the Rule of Benedict, Joan Chittister reminds us that in ancient civilizations, the law of the land was determined not by a democratic process but solely by the supreme leader. Subjects had no rights, only responsibilities. And the lawgiver could change the law on a whim or a fancy.[1]

For Rome, this understanding was pervasive both on the scale of empire and in the intimate setting of the household, where it was understood that the *paterfamilias*—the Roman father—"could do no wrong in his own home…He himself according to the principles of Roman jurisprudence was judge and jury, king and lawgiver."[2]

[1] Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century.* (New York: Crossroad, 2010) p. 276.
[2] Ibid.

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In his first chapter, Luke turns that paradigm on its head, as Zechariah—a high status priest in a highly public position and head of his family—is rendered mute and powerless for doubting God's plan, while his wife Elizabeth, who for years has labored unnoticed behind the scenes, takes her place at center stage.

Instead of focusing in on the presumed power brokers, Luke invites us into the world of two women—one past her prime, her womb after years of emptiness, suddenly fruitful; the other, young and newly pregnant, with Gabriel's voice still ringing in her ears.

When Elizabeth's young cousin Mary arrives unexpectedly for a visit, their embrace over Elizabeth's swelling belly and the turning of the baby within her, let us in on a secret that's both deeply personal and profoundly public.

But there's more… When Elizabeth says, "Blessed is she who believed there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord," she's contrasting Mary's trust in God's promise with her own husband Zechariah's skepticism.

Zechariah the religious professional doubted God, but Mary the peasant girl believed, and this trust opened the door for God to bless not just her but the whole world through her.[3]

Elizabeth celebrates Mary's willingness to say "yes" to God, and right out of the gate the consequences of these impending births begin lining up, and it begins to dawn on us that not only is Elizabeth's baby leaping—the whole world is about to turn!

As a pregnant but unmarried woman Mary might expect judgment, shame, even ostracism from her older kinswoman, but Elizabeth upends those expectations. Elizabeth knows from her own experience the cost of being shamed and excluded.[4]

In a culture that defined a woman's primary purpose as bearing children, Elizabeth had endured a lifetime of being treated as a failure. Her response to her own pregnancy shows her conviction that God's grace has reversed her shame:

> "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people," she'd said.[5]

Elizabeth continues this pattern of reversal by opening her arms and her home to a relative whom her neighbors may well expect her to reject. Instead of rejecting Mary, she welcomes, blesses, and celebrates her, seeing beyond the shamefulness of Mary's situation to the reality of God's love at work even among those whom society rejects and excludes.[6]

And then, it's Mary's turn. For when Mary sees her once barren cousin's roundness, when she experiences her welcome, she catches a glimpse of the Divine trajectory of hope within *their shared stories* and within *the human story*—and it rings out from her soul in a lyric of such crystal clarity that we've never forgotten it—or her.

> ***"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."***

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[3] See Judith Jones' commentary, *Working Preacher* http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2723
[4] Ibid.
[5] Luke 1:25
[6] Ibid.

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Mary's song, at first so deeply personal, lifts its sight beyond her personal story to encompass the hope of all those who feel lost, forsaken, downtrodden. Her answer to all who are hungry and abandoned, to all who wonder whether God hasn't forgotten them altogether is a resounding NO!

> ***This is the God I now see! she sings,***
> ***WHO SHOWS STRENGTH WITH HIS ARM AND SCATTERS THE PROUD,***
> ***WHO DE-THRONES THE POWERFUL AND LIFTS UP THE LOWLY.***
> ***WHO FILLS THE HUNGRY WITH GOOD THINGS AND SENDS THE RICH AWAY EMPTY.***

From the very beginning, you see, the stories of Jesus and John are stories that shatter old patterns and give us a fresh lens for viewing the world and discerning God's activity in it.

Mary's song of joy shows us how God's design connects the deeply personal with the greater arena of society and world. Her voice invites us to proclaim with the choices we make and the lives we live that we, too, are ready to put our trust in the One who makes all things new.

Luke's attention to detail teaches us how to understand God's presence in our own lives, too. For our lives also are full of specific facts and details—the circumstances of our birth, the stories of our ancestors, the silent prayers uttered by our parents to the Lord during the night; the conversations, arguments, and celebrations within our birth or adopted families and our church family.

These details are important—each one a line in a drawing that contributes to the shape of who we are becoming.

- When we witness Zechariah struck dumb for his lack of trust, we're reminded of the times we have failed to believe that God could be trusted to bring God's purpose for our lives to fruition.
- When we see Elizabeth welcome her young cousin without shame, we're reminded how freeing it could be to make our lives and households into shame-free zones.
- When we hear Mary's song we feel our hearts rise to witness with her how the world order goes topsy-turvy in Emmanuel.
- And when we hear the vulnerable cry of a newborn child echoing from a manger, our eyes and arms open to the poor, the homeless, the refugee, the lost and forsaken in our towns and cities and at our borders.

The story Luke tells us today is Good News because it affirms that the value and status of Mary and Elizabeth does not derive from their relationships with men but from their belief in the promises of God.

It's Good News, sisters and brothers, because it anchors our lives in the same story and same promises, and frees us to say with Elizabeth and Mary:

LET IT BE WITH ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD.

Amen.