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Micah 5:2-5a

5:2 But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

5:3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel.

5:4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth;

5:5 and he shall be the one of peace.

We pick up the gospel today with Mary visiting her cousin Elizabeth. An angel has just announced to Mary that she will bear a Son and name him Jesus. Picking up at verse 36, the angel says,
³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

1:39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,

1:40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

1:41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit

1:42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

1:43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?

1:44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.

1:45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Mary then sings her song of praise, the Magnificat, and stays for three months with her cousin Elizabeth. This the good news of salvation for the people of God. Thanks be to God!

Proclamation of the Word

Twenty one years ago I was pregnant with our son, Avery,
and preached this passage for the first time at a little church in Georgia.
Thankfully, a robe is made with room enough for two!

And the morning sickness subsided enough so I could climb into the pulpit, lean on the Holy Spirit, and attempt to bring this Word to life.

At the same time, my sister-in-law Crystal was also pregnant. Our babies would be born within days of one another, so we shared pregnancy woes and joys. I felt like I was the younger cousin, relying on her, my own Elizabeth. This would be Crystal's second birth, my first. So the older, wiser friend would help ease the anxiety of this younger mother to be.

This Scripture would come to life again for me when our daughter Hallie was born. Her middle name is Elizabeth for the joy she brought to us. Plus she was leaping and somersaulting in utero like John. Her name is a reminder of our biblical relative Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth's child leaped for joy in her womb at the sound of Mary's voice. I also love Elizabeth because she blesses Mary, 3 times, in fact. And she is a vessel through whom God works.

I wonder where this part of God's story connects with yours?

I know it is Mary's day. After all, she is the blessed mother of the Son of God. But I am thinking about Elizabeth, her older cousin. Mary will take center stage tomorrow night (5:00 and 9:00) Elizabeth and Zechariah do not get as much air time in Advent, but are significant. They are the parents of John, the messenger who prepares the way of the Lord. And John is a miracle baby, too. Too old and too infertile, Zechariah and Elizabeth have not been able to conceive. In their day, it was considered the woman's fault. Modern science has taught us that it indeed takes two! Elizabeth felt all the shame of being barren, unable to conceive. Like her great-foremother, Sarah, and like Hannah before her, she prayed to God for a child.

When they had almost given up on having a child, the angel brings the glad tidings that they will have a son and name him John. Zechariah is terrified. As they say, if an angel visits you and says, "Fear not" you better be ready to take your new assignment. John will bring many back to the Lord, the angel says.

"He will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of righteousness- to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luke 1:17)

To the angel's pronouncement, Zechariah says, "This is impossible for we're too old!"
And for not believing the angel, Zechariah becomes mute and cannot speak.
Like the angel says, "Nothing will be impossible for God!"
Then when John the Baptist is born, Zechariah's tongue is set loose,
and he sings God's praise.
John will be the one to prepare the people for the coming of Jesus the Messiah.

Jesus and John first meet in utero.

John was so thankful for the good news of salvation that Jesus brings
that he leaps for joy at that first meeting.

And Elizabeth has the joy and honor of being the vessel through which
John is born into the world.

So that is why I love and honor Elizabeth, doing her part, along with Zechariah to welcome the Savior,
the one Promised to Israel, whose kingdom will have no end.

Sometimes the situation seems hopeless, devastating even, before things turn around.
And it reminds us that God is working in all sorts of dead end situations, doesn't it?
When the impossible becomes possible, God is working all things out.
The older couple who never thought it was possible, pray for a child, and receive him.
That child John has a purpose and a role to fulfill God's work in the world.

Is that not our story, too?

When we hand things over into the able hands of God, God will work his ways out. Zechariah and
Elizabeth dedicate their child to God.

Through them God fulfills God's promises to his people.

God works in dead-end situations for the love of his people, his beloved community.

Even when things do not turn out the way we hope, God purposes will be revealed.

For nothing will be impossible with God.

I think one of the reasons I am thinking of Elizabeth is because lately

I have been thinking about my relative, Crystal.

Crystal was diagnosed at age 37 with estrogen-fed breast cancer.

Her baby, a daughter, Shelby, was only 7 months old.

Shelby was born two days after our Avery.

Sadly, Crystal who tried every treatment possible did not live.
She died when her daughter was in kindergarten.
God watches over the hurting, the vulnerable, and hears their cries.
We know this because God hears Elizabeth and Zechariah, and Mary.

Now Shelby is a junior here at Clemson.
Right before exams, Shelby called and sounded anxious.
She said she wants to change majors, but she is so behind.
She's not sure how it will all work.
I was in the car so we met up for what she called a "Life Meeting."
Shelby has been a Pre-veterinary Science major,
but a door opened this semester to be on a research team to study the effects of DNA sequencing on
predicting breast cancer of all things.
She is surprised that she enjoys the work and more importantly,
really cares about preventing breast cancer.
Knowing that her mom, Crystal died when Shelby was little, this was no surprise to me.

As Beuchner once wrote God calls you to where your deep gladness
and the world's deepest needs meet.
Shelby was asked by her professor to apply for a summer internship to do this research in New York, an
amazing opportunity.
The signs keep leading her to medicine over veterinary science.
Struggling with what all this means and how it will be possible to change majors,
I asked if the internship excited her, and she lit up.
She truly cares about breast cancer and people (even more than animals).

Isn't that is how God works? A door opens. You walk through it.
You come to another door. You test it or in this case, apply, and see what happens. Sometimes you
wander around, but every twist and turn,
each leg, may be leading toward another door.
If it remains closed, you turn in a new direction.
If it opens, you walk through with all your fears and questions,
all your hopes and excitement.
Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and her fiance Joseph, have been there, too.
Where does your deep gladness and the world's deep need meet?
(PAUSE) This is where God is calling you.

These cousins Mary and Elizabeth share their pregnancy journey.

God was doing a new thing in and through them.
They support one another, welcome one another, love one another through it.
A pregnant, unwed mother like Mary would have feared for her life.
In fact, we think Elizabeth may be harboring her cousin Mary for her own safety
because honor killings were a practice.
She took refuge in the safety of her cousin's house.
God watches over the hurting, the vulnerable, and hears their cries
And love risks itself for others.

The name Elizabeth means "God's Promise" (Eli Sheba)
and God's promises were being fulfilled in her.
She gets to do her part to serve God's coming Kingdom and the Christ,
the Messiah, her own nephew.

Most of all, I love this part of the salvation story because it speaks so tenderly of friendship and the risk
of LOVE.
Love is giving yourself over to someone or something bigger than self,
even to the larger purposes and plans of God.
Love seeks the well-being of others over self.
Love partners with God, cooperating to bring goodness and light, life and joy,
especially in your own hopes, fears, or even danger.

In love, my sister Crystal had to let go and trust her child into the hands of God and to our family.
To us, it felt like a terrifying reality, an impossible situation.
We were devastated.
Crystal was a strong woman of faith and trusted that all would be well.
In God's time, maybe her child will get to be a part of caring for women
and men who get that dreaded disease.
I am sure Shelby will work in part in memory of her sweet mama.

Can you look back at your own story and see where the hand of God took a hopeless, barren situation,
and brought new life?
birthing hope and healing, delivering justice and peace?
Sometimes it takes looking back over a long time, to see it.

God takes dead-end, hopeless, even tragic situations and brings about good.
God makes the impossible a possibility. Thanks be to God.

And thanks be to God for you, the Elizabeths, Zechariahs, Marys and Josephs who make room for Jesus
in their lives and their hearts
who serve God's bigger purposes,
who allow God's promises to be born through us,
who share the Light of Christ with this world,
this world that God so loves and is born to save.