

## The Joy of Community

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Good Morning First Church. It's been a long time since I've stood in this pulpit and I must say it feels really good to be back here. So many familiar faces. This church, and this community played such an important role in my own spiritual growth and pastoral development, so I am incredibly grateful that you all have invited me back.

Some of you may have been wondering what I've been up to the past year or so.... I'd love to talk more with any of you who are curious to know more about it. When I accepted this invitation to preach, I was a bit nervous because of the work I was doing I felt so far removed from the church, but then I remembered I was communing with God every day. But this year has really brought up this theme of community.

Advent is my favorite liturgical season because, we are looking forward to the birth of Jesus. It is a time where we celebrate love hope, peace and joy, all which are represented in his Birth. This is a season, where we are called to give our praise and thanks to God. To let God, know how grateful we are for what and who we have.

It's funny because I think I preached on this exact text a couple years ago around this same time, here at first church, and for a long time, when I read Mary's song of praise, I thought she was only giving thanks to God for her pregnancy. For the coming birth of the Son of Man, the salvation of the World. I figured she was so overwhelmed with joy by the irony of her situation that she couldn't help but say thank you. At that time, many people of the Judaic faith expected the Messiah to be born into royalty, maybe to some rich or wealthy family. Not to her, a poor, relatively unknown young woman from Nazareth.

For centuries, dating all the way back to genesis, the scriptures pointed to a Savior who would deliver the world from spiritual bondage and establish God's kingdom on earth. You can imagine then, when Mary learned of her pregnancy, she was probably skeptical. Surely this could not be the savior the prophets spoke of! And what she didn't know, was that Baby Jesus would be born in a barn, in the middle of the night, placed in a feeding trough, surrounded by a bunch of weird old goat and sheep-herders who probably smelled really bad and had poor social skills... and I can say that because I've been one of them for the past year. So, I think this entire story, the whole situation was unexpected, so in our text for today, on the surface, the main message of the Magnificat is Mary giving thanks to God for the miracle that is about to take place. But the more I think about her state of mind, the worry and confusion she probably had. I believe she is also singing a song of praise to God for blessing her with a loving community. A community found in Elizabeth.

Shortly before Mary's song, the Angel Gabriel appears to her and says, beginning in verse **30**, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. **31** And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. **32** He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, **33** and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ... And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has ALSO conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. **37** For nothing will be impossible with God.

When Mary visits Elizabeth in the hill country of Judah, they see each other, the baby leaps in Elizabeth's womb and she is filled with the holy spirit. Mary sings her song of praise and they stay together for three long months... This is a powerful moment and when I imagine it, I see a lot of joy and relief shared between the two of them. Because they now know they are not alone in their experience. The pregnancies of both Elizabeth and Mary, from a practical perspective are impossible. But look at how God has made the impossible possible with them both. This is a moment of affirmation, confirming that God has been in control the entire time. Not only that, but the community they have established with each other, is actually how they can see and experience the works of God, and also be mutually supported in their pregnancy.

Community is different for everyone, but you know when you've found it. It's not just being around people you know or know you. It's being with people who share your lived experience, struggles and all. It's being around people who love you for who you are, but will also hold you accountable, people who you can share your laughter's, joys, and sorrows, without fear of judgement or shame. Where you can argue and not worry about being discarded. It's people you can sit and share beautiful silence with. Its people with whom you can be your authentic self and release all the subconscious fears, pressures, and expectations that we all carry every single day.

The greatest fulfillment that we can ever have is to belong, and to be held within a loving community. So, Mary's song of praise, her joy, is partly because of Jesus but it also reflects her appreciation that she has Elizabeth! A close friend and family member who is sharing in her lived experience. Someone who can relate to her struggles.

How wonderful it is to be loved, cared for and safe among your loved ones. I'm always thinking about this theme of community, and I imagine many folks here do as well. It's something I've struggled with the past year working in agriculture, improv...agriculture is tough work... I can tell you, we can love the work we do. We can be living our dream, and passions out every single day, but if we don't ever have the opportunity to do that in community then there will always be something more that is desired.

There are so many demands in our lives that take us away from our community. Technology, Work, school, travel, global pandemics. Think about it. Look at the way the world is organized, the reality is, many of us spend more time craving community instead of being in it. And if we're lucky, we get a week or two off at the end of the year to travel and see our loved ones. Many professionals agree that one of the most important factors that contribute to human mental health is strong social and communal ties. Without them, we suffer. The modern world has developed a lot faster than our brains have, and sometimes we need to just get back to the basics to find wellness. We see the importance of community all throughout the Bible.

Jesus ministers to people, in community. He made time for leisure in community. The community of the apostles helped him in his ministry. His entire life was dedicated to encouraging us to unify as one in the community of the church. Everything about Jesus' work on this earth was to teach us to prioritize community, and loving others as we love ourselves.

BUT he also emphasized that the work of God should not BE DONE ALONE or in isolation. Solitude is important but that's different! And I don't think solitude was meant to be a permanent state. The scriptures teach us that where two or more are gathered, Christ is there among them. There's something sacred about groups of people coming together, especially to honor God and to do good in the world. It is in community where the spirit of God can flow and inspire us to make an impact on the world. It is in community where the spirit of God can flow and work through the people around us. And our text is a perfect example of that,

if Mary or Elizabeth had to endure this time alone, I assure you it would have been a very different experience. There probably would have been a lot less joy and much more worry. The words of the Magnificat would have been very different. But because both of them were in it together, they could be mutually affirmed to know God had ordained the entire thing...

Never should we ever fall into the trap of thinking we can rely only on ourselves. Or that we can have the most fulfilling relationship with God on our own without being a part of a loving community. Whether during times of hardship or great success, in all of those moments we should be coming closer to one another and giving our praise to the most high. This is why I love advent because this is the time to do that. It is a time to really stop and think about what's important, who is important.

But sometimes our culture beyond the church, will miss the point of Advent. The Christmas season we all know, is a time where many people tend to focus ON THINGS... and I understand why. This economic system is dependent upon the purchase and exchange of goods and services. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with having things or giving gifts. But companies understand human psychology, and through clever marketing techniques and advertising, they are able to convince us that the acquisition of their goods will fulfill our desires. And make us whole. Some of us have made our possessions our COMMUNITY. Due to an overall breakdown in social and spiritual bonds we may fill that void with things... Oh if I can just have that new car, that new gadget, that new house, that new thing, that new job, then I'll be happy. I'll have everything I need. This is the last thing I will need. And what happens, you might be good for a couple months until that new thing comes out and it's the same cycle all over again. During this season we should be seeking out and craving community above all else. I heard a wise man say once, slow to purchase, quick to self-care. I think that applies here as well. Slow to purchase, quick to spend time with loved ones, friends, family the people who have and always will support us.

Colossians 3:2 reads set your mind on things that are above and not simply things that are on earth.

What if we got in the habit of setting our minds on the love of God and the love of our community. Can you think to a time when you've felt that overwhelming presence of God in community with others?... hopefully every Sunday right! It is hard to explain what it does to you. From personal experience it doesn't matter what's going on in my life, how bad things are, how great things are, it's always healing and restorative, and I think that's what we need more of.

I think of Mary and Elizabeth, during those three months, what they shared with one another. The hopes the questions.... What does the mother, who is about to give birth to arguably one of the most important human beings to ever walk the earth, think about? I imagine there was a lot of laughter. A lot of joy. I think we all need an Elizabeth in our lives.

Who do you love? When's the last time you were with them, and just spent quality time. Who do you consider your community? And that doesn't necessarily have to be relatives. It can be anyone. I encourage us all, to reflect, and answer those questions. And then work on prioritizing and strengthening those relationships. Which I believe, will do more for our wellbeing than we could ever imagine.

But I must also say, I know there are those of us here that struggle during this season. Because of the people we've lost. The community members that have gone on to higher realms. And the pain of their absence, at times is too much to bear. There are those of us here, who have lost most of our community, do to death, separation, or just time.

I know God understands that. But we must never forget that we are loved, are worthy love, Gods love, and communal love. And wherever we are in our journey. We deserve that. Check in on each other during this season First church. Extend a loving invitation to someone. Connect. Grow, build your community, strengthen the ties within the ones you already have. I know this one in particular, this church, continues to be a pillar of light, love, and hope for so many people in this community, and I feel blessed to be a part of it.

So beloved, in the spirit of Christ, and loving community, I pray that we can receive the blessing of the holy spirit. That we can establish and strengthen the bonds in our lives, and most importantly, we can dedicate those relationships to God. So that God can be at work in us, and we can be guided to do the work of Christ in the church, and beyond. Amen.