

"Nurtured by God's Promise"
(Luke 1:39-45)
December 19, 2021

We might think, prophets were mainly older men to whom God offered messages of "doom and gloom." But was this always the case? The scripture we read this morning reported an example, how God called a prophetess who didn't even know that it happened to her. And that prophetess was Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. A long time ago, being a descendant of Aaron, when still young, she married Zechariah, a member of the priestly family. What an excellent combination! However, according to Jewish culture, one can't say her marriage was a happy one because of her barrenness. Having children was a sign of God's blessing. Without it, she became a disgrace, especially in a priestly family. So, one can imagine, the pressure on her lasted for decades, even after she grew old and could no longer become pregnant. Would her life end like that?

Tamar would die childless and disappear from history if she didn't disguise herself as a prostitute and get pregnant from her father-in-law, Judah. Rahab was a prostitute. If she didn't assist the spies in conquering Jericho, she wouldn't get married like a normal woman and become the mother of Boaz. Ruth was a Moabite. If she didn't follow the instruction of Naomi, her mother-in-law, and seduced Boaz, she wouldn't be on the genealogy of King David. The women above grasped the chances offered to them, and their names remain important in Israelite history. How they took their lives into their own hands would easily invite criticism. But didn't God promise to look after the people suffering from injustice, mercilessness, and godlessness (Micah 6:8)? Would one has a clean record if one lives under bad conditions for a long time, or even for generations?

Elizabeth's case was worse. Her case would be closed if God didn't intervene. When Mary heard from Gabriel that Elizabeth was pregnant, she immediately went to see her. Was the trip only for congratulating Elizabeth or also for Mary herself? We don't know. But Mary hid there for about three months. She must have shared the news of her pregnancy with Elizabeth during the stay. And the story we read this morning summarized what happened between them during these three months.

Elizabeth said to Mary, "Blessed are you among women"? Mary was young, pledged to marry Joseph, a descendent of David. That must have reminded Elizabeth of her past. As we said before, she was once young too, pledged to marry Zechariah, a member of the priestly family. Even though she was unhappy for an extended period, but now, everything had changed. John in her womb brought her honor to the priestly family. On top of it, God spoke through her directly instead of her husband. She became the mouthpiece of God, a prophetess. Due to her painful experience and the salvific experience, she could see Mary's situation from a different perspective, God's perspective. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth had their lives changed, so could Mary. Elizabeth was a witness to such a miracle. She knew the difficulty Mary got herself into. She might even foresee the pressure coming from her fiancée, Joseph, once he knew it. But the Holy Spirit enlightened Elizabeth and let her not only understand the meaning of John's bouncing in her womb but also see God's blessing on Mary as well as on the fruit in her womb. She identified Mary's baby as a great man, so great that she would call him "my Lord."

Many of us don't have such ecstatic experiences as Elizabeth. Instead, we experience emotional episodes due to the coronavirus pandemic, more

challenging than ever. They might come from the sickness itself, leading to family and friends losses, government restrictions, or struggling to see when it would be over. We all miss the old way of living, even though it was not the best. Would God call us when we are in the middle of our messiness?

A friend recently shared a story of her friend who traveled alone to another country . She must stay in the hotel on her own for twenty-one days. Food would be delivered to the door three times daily, without the chance to see anyone. She almost went mad after three days because of this. To avoid getting insane, she tried to practice her long-forgotten meditation exercise since there was nothing else to do. Looking through the windows, stopping to think 2-3 minutes each time, three times a day, that was what she did. Now, she started to treasure this experience. It was like a gift to her for examining and nurturing her spiritual needs by showing appreciation for the beauty of silence. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." (Matt 5:8) Do you think she had a glimpse of this promise?

Before the pandemic, a teenager in Hong Kong went with his parents to Sichuan for vacation. They talked about that trip for a long time and were so excited about the food and places they would visit. However, when they arrived, the young man found that he had forgotten to bring something with him. He couldn't find his smartphone and video game console. You can imagine what impact this would be to this young fellow. "Shorten the trip! I can't live like that. I must go back. The sooner, the better." He told his parents. "No! Our tickets are return tickets," said the parents. You know what? The young man felt very sad for the first few days but soon started to look at the sceneries, listen to his parents' conversation, and even have conversations with them. That trip has become one of the trips he would treasure and never forget. "Blessed are those who mourn,

for they will be comforted." (Matt 5: 4) Do we realize that it might be an example of another fulfillment of God's promise?

Do you have experiences similar to the two persons just mentioned? How would you describe them? They could be something that has nothing special, just another one of your daily routines. What if you stop for a second? Hold a sacred space so that God can talk to you. How did you feel when you heard the cry of someone's baby or yours at birth? What a relief, isn't it? But after listening to their cry for a few hours? The same blissful feeling would disappear. Just like the accumulative effect of the noises in our lives blinds us from seeing and remembering the opportune moment when life began, a great person inside the womb of another great person.

Do you remember having good interactions with children when they were young? I hope you do, but I'm not surprised if you don't when they become teenagers. We have created a new world that is very different from the one we are familiar with. Our next generations are living in that new world. Do you still remember the teenager who went on a vacation with his parents to Sichuan? He got a chance, an opportune moment to experience both, an experience that not all kids nowadays have. Do you believe there is good stuff in both worlds that would benefit them? How can we help them to enjoy both?

It isn't impossible to recognize God's Blessing and promise. But it's not easy. It requires an appreciating heart, one that shows thanksgiving even in difficulty. Elizabeth was not the only person who didn't look like one God would call to be a prophetess. But God did call her. It's a good reminder that God might call us all to be God's prophets or prophetesses. God's work of salvation is full of surprises, and God chooses to act in our lives, in your lives. So let go of all obstacles and sing

with Mary and Elizabeth, rejoice in God's Messiah that we are greeting in a few days from now. Amen.