

## LOVE STORY?

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*December 19, 2021, Fourth Sunday in Advent*

**Text: Luke 1:39–45**

Our scripture today deals with pregnancy and birth. Our time of Advent is rooted in expectant waiting. Stories such as this may remind us of the birth stories of our lives, which can be full of wonder and also loss and hurt. Whatever stories you are holding, please care for yourself; your clergy are always available to listen. Let us pray:

*God remembered and felt in our many stories, hold us tenderly in your love as we continue to be expectant and wait and gestate the possibilities we will celebrate being born on Christmas Day. Amen.*

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that God would fulfill the promises to her!"

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As I spent the last week preparing to be in conversation with you all today, I realized that there are so many stories I want to tell you. One of the pieces of this work that I find so meaningful is that I am often the receiver of many other people's stories, and I wish that I could share them all with you: stories of loved and lost dogs and terrifying moments inside and outside of our schools; stories of young people and elders, losses and gains, decisions that have no easy answer. But I cannot tell you all of these stories today, partially because of time, partially because of confidentiality, and partially because some stories need to be told with different language to different ages. If you would ever like to hear some stories, invite me out for coffee or a phone call. I will buy the hot beverage and we can tell each other stories. I have many and I would like to hear yours.

Stories are how we organize and share our lives. Stories come in many forms and can be explained in two primary categories: the experiential and the imaginative. The experiential is when we share a moment of our lives with others. This is our non-fiction: This happened to me, I felt this, I did that, here was my experience. When you tell me a story from your life, I learn from you: I internalize some meaning and lessons from an event that I did not actually participate in. Imaginative stories are rooted in our experience but use our imagination to stretch the reality into a what-if. This is what we often receive in our works of fiction, drama, and film.

As a collector and receiver of these stories, I feel as if I have been witnessing a shift as of late. As our experiential stories become more rooted in fear and anxiety, so do our imaginative stories. As the pandemic carries on with hospitals full and concerns about new variants and in-person gatherings, our stories have become more fraught. We whisper these stories of fear and tales of great loss. As our cultural love of firearms continues to grow and they proliferate widely, the stories from young people, their parents and teachers continue to hold the anxiety of lockdowns and drills. As the structures of white supremacy

continue to be revealed and seen with open eyes, these stories grow frustrated with inaction and the weight of centuries.

These experiential stories though are not very new. We have always told the stories of disease, violence, fear, and oppression. What seems to be shifting to me as an observer of stories is that our imaginative stories are mirroring our experiential ones. We are imagining a future that looks like our present unended. We tell stories of dystopia and collapse, speculate on the worst possible outcomes in our near futures. We are very good at imagining the worst and the hopeless, and I am becoming concerned that our imagination is becoming too limited to imagine a hoped-for future. I hear too many people throw up their hands in a posture of inevitability. And when we cannot imagine a hoped-for future, there is less and less chance that we will be able to create it.

Human beings often create the reality that our imaginations lead us to create. If we imagine stories of collapse, we are more likely to live into that. If we imagine stories of hope, we are more likely to create that reality. If our stories cannot see past the present pains and complications, then we will just replicate them. We must be able to tell stories of the world that we wish to inhabit. If we only imagine stories of environmental destruction, then how will we create something otherwise? If we only imagine stories about living with gun violence, then how will we ever create a world in which that is not something our children need to do? If we only imagine the stories of continued castes and oppression, then how do we create a roadmap that gets us out of this? Our imaginations are more powerful than we often understand. Our stories direct our future. We must imagine stories of love, stories of a hoped-for future if we are ever going to get there. We must believe that the world that God wishes for us can be possible and then set our imaginations afire until we move that hoped-for world forward.

And this is what we hear in this scripture reading for today. Elizabeth imagines something radical here. She says: “Blessed is she who has believed that God would fulfill the promises to her!” She embodies an entire imaginative story of a hoped-for future in one simple sentence, because there would have been little in the realities of the world around her that should have inspired such a confident sentence. To name herself as blessed and to imagine that any promises could even be fulfilled for her was one of loving imagination. Remember, we need to leave our modern understandings of the world and try to see Mary and Elizabeth’s context. We get to go back two thousand years ago, in the first century of the common era, to Roman Palestine. This was at the very far edge of Roman control and had only recently become part of the empire. Palestine (or Judea) was overseen by Herod and later his sons, who were puppet rulers for the Roman Emperor. It is estimated that up to 90% of the people lived in great poverty as a peasant class. This included Mary and Elizabeth and probably everyone they knew. No one except a very few elites was literate, and most people lived a subsistence existence because both Herod and the Romans took everything they could from the general population to pay for their opulence.<sup>1</sup> Then remember that Mary was young and unmarried, while Elizabeth was beyond typical child-bearing age with a husband who recently lost the ability to speak.

Add on to this that infant mortality was significant. The infant mortality rate in our society is 0.6%. It is estimated that it was between 25% and 50% at the time of Jesus’ birth.<sup>2</sup> Up to half of the pregnancies that Mary and Elizabeth were witness to ended in death. And yet Elizabeth names herself as blessed. Both of these women saw the lives of their peers and the thefts of the powerful, and still Elizabeth believes that

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<sup>1</sup>Sakari Häkkinen, “Poverty in the first-century Galilee,” *Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO) South Africa*, [http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S0259-94222016000400046](http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222016000400046) (accessed January 20, 2022).

<sup>2</sup>Meir Bar-Ilan, “Infant Mortality in The Land of Israel in Late Antiquity,” *Bar-Ilan University*, <https://faculty.biu.ac.il/~barilm/articles/publications/publications0024.html> (accessed January 20, 2022).

God would fulfill promises to her. There was nothing in their lives and communities that would indicate that kind of a hoped-for future, and yet both women believed it was possible. They believed that the promises of God could come true, and even if they didn't see it today, it was possible tomorrow. Both of them were pregnant with the audacity of love.

And we can do the same. We do not need to like what is happening now in order to stand in the love of God and believe that it won't always be this way. We are capable of telling our love stories that imagine a better tomorrow even when today is not ideal. We do not need things to be excellent to imagine something better. DeWayne reminded us a few weeks ago that the powerful hymn of hope "Lift Every Voice and Sing" was written not when things were good, but in a time of great fear, loss, and destruction in Jim Crow America.

What stories can you imagine as necessary? What stories can you imagine as a hoped-for future? What stories can you imagine that counteract that which you currently witness? We are about to celebrate the birth of something new, the days are about to get longer; what do you imagine is possible despite what you may witness or hear about around you?

"Do not be afraid," said the angel to Mary. "Do not be afraid," said the angel to the shepherds. "Do not be afraid," said the messengers of God to us all. Do not be afraid to imagine that which is hoped-for. Do not let your fear trap you in a false cycle of acceptance and inevitability. Imagine your stories with love and carry them in your bodies. Use your daily actions to tell the story of what you imagine can be possible. There are solutions out there and there are possibilities available, and we get to imagine a hoped-for world that opens up the space for these solutions to be realized. Embody these love stories the way that Mary and Elizabeth did in a dire place millennia ago under the thumb of an oppressive empire. Embody your love stories, expand your imaginations, and do not be afraid to say, like our ancestor Elizabeth, "Blessed are we who believe that God would fulfill the promises to us." May it be so.