

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: December 18 2022, Year A, 4th Sunday of Advent

Using Sanctified Art "From Generation to Generation" theme and designated readings (slightly adapted from the Lectionary)

Text: Luke 1:39-58 (Or Luke 1:39-45, 56-58 without the Magnificat)

Title: "We See God in Each Other" (*Sanctified Art* theme)

Focus: We have hopes and dreams for ourselves or for our kids. Our own hopes and dreams are intertwined with listening for God's call to us. Elizabeth provided a safe place for Mary to connect and to confirm her sense of God's call. How do we in the family of faith provide a setting in which we help see God in each other or confirm God's call to us?

A line from the prayer of confession: "We need one another to see God more clearly."

Gospel Reading: Luke 1:39-45; 56-58

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

⁵⁶And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

⁵⁷Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

Our Hopes and Dreams for Ourselves and Our Children

I asked some of the kids who sit at our coloring table along with their parents, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

- Dania, age 6: An artist and book writer.
- Thea, age 6: An artist or scientist.
- Esme, age 3, Thea's sister: A writer.
- Silas, age 3, Dania's brother, who said to his mom: "I want to be big like you and drive your car."

Do you remember how you would answer that question when you were 6 or 12 or 20?

You might recall the sermon for the first Sunday of Advent when I had a quiz question for you. The question was, “On a college campus, what are the 2 most common questions first-year students ask each other?”

- “Where are you from?” and
- “What’s your major?”

The reason I asked you that then was to talk about how we get to know others or how we concisely introduce ourselves to them. But declaring one’s major in school is also a part of the process of discovering one’s identity and calling.

- What do I like?
- What am I good at?
- What brings me joy or satisfaction?

While declaring one’s major may sound like an academic question asked on campus or a career-oriented question, I also see it as a part of a process which is connected to the joy that comes when you discover God’s call for you. Pastor and author Frederick Buechner described vocation in this way:

“Vocation comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call, and means the work a [person] is called to by God. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”¹

- What are the hopes and dreams we have for ourselves?
- Or what are the hopes and dreams we have for our children?
- What’s the connection between our hopes and dreams and how we listen to God’s call to us?

A Mother’s Hopes for her Daughters

Whitney writes about being a mom to three teenage girls and the kind of environment she wishes to create for them or the kind of relationship she wishes to have with them. Her story reflects the hopes and dreams she has for her girls.

She is eager and expectant for them as they grow and as they discover what might be their call—what Buechner describes as the place that is the intersection of your deep gladness and the world’s deep need.

A parenting reflection from Whitney Fleming, posted Oct. 29, 2022²

Here’s what Whitney writes . . .

I’ve been leaving our porch light on a lot recently.

¹ Originally published in his book *Wishful Thinking*.

² Posted on her Facebook page, Whitney Fleming Writes, on May 19, 2022.

<https://www.facebook.com/playdatesonfridays/posts/pfbid03748b2Cc8YnaCZnK5p7Rh5eH2WwvNrUQYmF2M7AjBJJLwuMBbUWWRDzxnWUsm2rRI>

See also <https://whitneyflemingwrites.com/>

My teenagers arrive late in the evening, from sports and activities, from dates and parties, from work and babysitting--and I want them to see their way back into our home.

So, I leave the porch light on.

And I think as parents, that's all we can do as our kids start to leave our haven for a little bit longer each time—let them know they have an entryway back to their safe place.

So, I leave the porch light on. I keep the refrigerator full of snacks. I leave my bedroom door open. I offer rides when I know they can drive themselves. I make their favorite meals.

I do these things now so they know they can always come home, so they want to come home, so they know they can always turn to me in the good and the bad.

It's a rough ride raising teenagers, and sometimes I understand why birds push their babies out of the nest. The tug-of-war between their desire for independence and their parents' need for boundaries to keep them safe can simply be exhausting.

But no matter how trying a time it is, no matter how many growing pains we experience, no matter how much we butt heads, I want them to know they can always come home.

I'll make sure the porch light is always on for them in whatever way I can.

END

Reflection on her story: We Provide a Safe Place for Others Who are Dear to Us

“Leave the light on.”

That image of leaving the porch light on for them is what grabs me. What it says to me is **Show them that, no matter what, you love them and want to create a safe place for them.**

Along with appreciating this story, I also appreciated reading some responses to it of other parents sharing how they try to create that same sense of home, of safety, of support and community not just to one's own children, but to their circle of friends.

Peggy says: My husband and I always told our 2 children that we would always be available no matter the situation and time. One night we received a phone call to come and pick up our daughter at a party. She talked some of her friends into leaving with her. The only question we asked at the time was “Is everyone safe?”

One other time, we got a call and my husband went to pick one of them up. When I got up the next morning, there were 6 girls sleeping on the floor and a note saying they had called their parents to let them know they were safe and at our house.

Our kids are now adults with teens of their own and they have the same agreement with their kids

Shirley says: A wonderful way to put it. The porch light is a symbol of our availability and love no matter how old they are.

Gina says: I do the same, girl. These kids need our beacons of light. This is, and always has been, a rough world to navigate.

Mary says: As a grandma to a teen and a preteen, I try to answer every text and phone call no matter what time or how insignificant it may seem. They need to know they can count on me to be there for them and that nothing is too crazy to share with grandma. You can always call me if you can't sleep. I am retired and don't have to get up for work like mom and dad. I will drive you, pick you up, take you to the store while I still can. I hope they will remember this.

Dawn: I love this! That's exactly how I was when my kids were home and teenagers. They always had their friends hang at our house and I welcomed them. I wanted them to do it, so I knew who they were with. I always had snacks for them and they always called me mom. No questions asked. I miss those days because they were the best years with them. I wouldn't change it for the world. And now they have it with their own family and the circle goes on!

Mary's Call to be the Mother of Jesus

“Leave the light on.” That's the symbol or metaphor for the support we can offer one another, which is especially important at a time of transition or significant change.

In the gospel story, Mary is at a time of transition and (pending) great change when she, as the text says, “went with haste” and “entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth” (Luke 1:39-40).

Do you remember what's going on for Mary? As we read two weeks ago from the beginning part of chapter 1 of Luke:

- The angel Gabriel appeared to her, told her that she is pregnant and that she will bear a son, whom she will call Jesus.
- It is God's call to her expressed through Gabriel.
- She responded, “How can this be?”
- As Gabriel explains (to the degree that something so preposterous could be explained) that the Holy Spirit will come upon her.
- The tangible sign that he provides is that Elizabeth, Mary's cousin or relative, is pregnant and now in her sixth month.

It's like he's saying, “I know, it sounds crazy. . . but Elizabeth, who is old and was said to be barren, is 6 months into her pregnancy. ‘For nothing will be impossible with God.’ He points to Elizabeth as a sign to Mary, saying, “I know what I'm telling you about yourself and God's call to you sounds a bit nutty, but here's a sign—Elizabeth—that it's really God at work and not something crazy.”

And so, Mary “went with haste” to see Elizabeth and Elizabeth is like the parent or family member who has intentionally left the porch light on as a sign of welcome.

Mary, in her response to Gabriel, and, in a larger sense as a response to God's call, first says,

- "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34)

And, after Gabriel describes the presence of the Spirit and Mary's role and points to Elizabeth, Mary responds

- "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (Luke 1:38).

So Mary has moved from saying "How can this be?" to "let it be with me according to your word," but I also imagine that this process of reflecting on and understanding God's call is not instantaneous, but incremental and ongoing.

Mary visits Elizabeth; Elizabeth Confirms Mary's Sense of Call

And so she seeks out Elizabeth, her cousin, the one whom Gabriel told her is a sign for her that "Nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). And Elizabeth is a part of a community which figuratively leaves the porch light on for Mary. She is the one who is providing a place of safety and security at a time of major change.

Mary went "with haste" to see Elizabeth (v. 39). There was some sense of urgency or importance. Gabriel has pointed to Elizabeth as a sign that what he says about God's call to Mary, as wacky as it sounds, is truly God at work.

Did you see what happens next?

- ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb.
- She recognizes Mary's baby to come as Lord
- And she offers a blessing
 - And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

At a turning point in Mary's life, at a time of transition or what we might call a threshold moment in which she is both literally standing in Elizabeth's doorway or threshold as well as figuratively standing at this moment of pending change, Elizabeth confirms in Mary the call of God that Mary has begun to hear and process. Elizabeth sees God at work in Mary.

A Community at Good Shepherd: We See God in Each Other; We Can help each other live out God's Call

Mom Whitney has written about leaving a porch light on for her three teenage daughters, so that they and the close friends around them would grow to discover their call while they are surrounded by steadfast love and a deep sense of security.

Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, greets Mary with enthusiasm. Both the baby kicking and her words of blessing confirm God's call to Mary to be the God-bearer, the mother of Jesus.

Can we in the family of faith at Good Shepherd provide that for one another? Can we create a place of security and trust that leaves a porch light on for each other? Can we provide that for the children and teenagers and young adults in our midst? Can that metaphorical porch light declare to them

- You belong here
- You are loved
- God loves you and this family of faith loves you
- There's a place for you here.
- We want to see God in you or see God active in you or help you discover God's call for you in the same way that cousin Elizabeth did that for Mary.

Last week's Kids' Community Christmas play is a sign of that kind of community. We saw. . .

- Kids of all ages taking part
- High schoolers and college students joining in
- Story narration by the Robertson family
- Dancing angels with lights
- Church mice huddling
- Little sheep wandering
- A braying donkey
- A star jumping for joy
- Singing cows and doves: A newcomer remarked, "And all those boys who sang solos!"
- Singing with Roberta at the piano, Nichole as cantor, Alexis as the voice of Mary, and Jessica singing and signing with her hands (American Sign Language).

We are a part of this story of faith. We trust in a God who loves us and wants the best for us. God has blessed us with a family to surround us who wants to leave the light on for us and help us to see God's call for us.

Thanks be to God for those who leave the porch light on for us.