

Title: Friendship and Love Give Birth to Song

Subtitle: God uses adversity to build the bonds of friendships that give us cause to rejoice and sing.

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/KiRwyC799s>

Today's Gospel story features two women whose lives were filled with emotional dynamics that are common to us all. Their loneliness and humble circumstances connect us to their humanity, and it drew the two of them together.

Imagine with me, if you will, what it must have been like for Mary. She is a young woman, probably fourteen or fifteen years old, from Nazareth. Nazareth was a small town with a questionable reputation. Archaeologists recently discovered that there was a Roman garrison located there. Consequently, it was a crossroad for Gentile influences and most likely a haven for prostitution. Even a good person like Nathaniel, who Jesus said, was a man without guile, asked, "***Can anything good come from Nazareth?***"¹ Now, here comes a young woman from that town, who finds herself pregnant without a husband, and people are supposed to believe the child has a miraculous origin. Even her espoused husband, Joseph, wasn't ready to believe her. Who, under those circumstances, is going to believe her? In her loneliness, she needed someone to help her carry the burden of this pregnancy.

As it turns out, her aunt, Elizabeth, was just such a person. She was older and wiser and a woman with deep faith. Her husband was a priest, and she is well acquainted with Holy

¹ John 1:46

Scripture. Yet she had born the grief and shame of childlessness for years until God, in her old age, intervened.

When she and Elizabeth finally meet, before a word is even spoken, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, greets Mary with the prophetic words, ***“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!”***² Then in her astonishment, she exclaims, ***“why is this that the mother of my Lord should come to me.”***³ These much-needed words were like the salve to a weary soul. Then Mary, almost beside herself, breaks out into a song of praise.

Each needed a companion in their journey. Then through divine inspiration and mutual understanding, their friendship begins to blossom. Now tears and fears were safely shared, for they knew they had nothing to hide from each other.

Elizabeth's support to Mary reminds me of the kind of advice the Mother Superior gave to a young aspiring nun named Maria in the Musical, ***The Sound of Music***. In that story, Maria returns to the Abbey, confused by her feelings for Captain von Trapp. In her perplexity, the Mother Abbess assures her that loving another person can be part of what God wants us to do. “You must find the life you were born to live,” she says before singing the inspirational anthem, ***Climb Every Mountain.***⁴ That song, much like ***The Song of Mary***, once heard, goes with you for the rest of your life.

² Luke 1:42

³ Luke 1:43

⁴ Written by Rogers and Hammerstein, 1959

The context in each of those songs was forged through the crisis of human perplexity and need, which helped form a bond of friendship that lasted a lifetime, and it is a model for all of us. None of us are meant to live our Christian faith in isolation from others. When friends like this meet, they are indeed a gift from God, and they cause our joy to overflow.

God, in His mercy, has given people like this to me. Some are here in this congregation. Others have been people I met during the lowest parts of my spiritual journey. They have stood by me, listened to me, and prayed for me, for which I will forever be grateful. One such person, I met just over 50 years ago when I was a freshman at Montreat Anderson College. She and her husband were missionaries, home on furlough. While living in Montreat, North Carolina, they had an outreach to college students. They regularly welcomed me into their home, shared meals with me, and allowed me to ask them all sorts of questions. And I had lots of them, ranging from dating issues to deeper questions like baptism and how to understand the Trinity. Ann is now 92 years, her husband, Adger, passed away years ago. I saw her recently in Black Mountain, where she now lives in a nursing home. While her mind might be slowing down, her spirit was much alive as we sang old songs we used to sing together. I will never forget the impact she and her husband made on my life.

We need each other through the perplexities and difficulties of life. Relationships are not based on trying to have it all together. Real love is found in the midst of the messiness of

life, where grace for all of our challenges and brokenness is experienced.

This kind of Christian fellowship opens the way to true joy and inspiration. When Mary found this kind of support, she couldn't help but break out into the exhilaration of song as she exclaims: "***My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.***" Her song is not just Mary's song; it is our song. It is a song that has roots in the story of our salvation, where God, through His almighty power, reverses human fortunes and takes us to a place beyond our wildest dreams. It celebrates the assurance of God's mercy to those who fear him in every generation. For He "***...has regard for our low estate,***" however daunting and seemly hopeless our particular circumstances might be.

If ever there was a time when we needed songs of hope, it is now. We need to be reminded of the dream that God is able to break into our lives even amid the most unpromising circumstances. The Advent themes in our readings these past few weeks have shown us that while hope may be well-acquainted with weariness, it points beyond that disillusionment toward the place and time when a new song will be born because our hope will one day be fulfilled. The melody may at times be garbled with tears. We, like Mary, may find ourselves vulnerable and wondering if we have what it takes to pursue our dreams, but through the help of others God sends our way, we can learn how to sing that new song. We may be a little out of tune, but we can begin right where we are, for God is ready and waiting to fill the hungry with good things as we start to live the adventure that God has planned for each of us. Amen.