

Some of the greatest experiences we have in life fill us with both joy and fear at the same time. Excitement and trepidation can often go hand in hand when we are about to embark on something big or new or long-awaited. Usually what makes the experience great is when the joy and excitement outweigh the fear and trepidation. I think of a first day of school, a first day of a new activity or class or hobby, starting college and moving away from home for the first time, starting a first real professional job or any new job, getting married, having a baby, having a second or third or even more babies, travelling to a new place, especially a new country, retiring, becoming a grandparent, all of these joyful and exciting, yet also often nerve-wracking.

This combination of joy and fear gives us the gift of the range of feelings as a human, the wide expanse of what it is to be human.

Both Elizabeth and Mary experienced this powerful, human combination of trepidation and joy in our Gospel stories today. And both of these women praise God in the midst of their stories, even in the most challenging of times.

Elizabeth is likely in her seventies or eighties when this story takes place, and after a lifetime of believing she was unable to have children, she became pregnant with a son. The son Elizabeth is carrying at this time is John, who we know as the Baptist, from our previous weeks' readings and beyond - our beloved, weird, intense relative of Jesus who baptizes many in the Jordan River with words of repentance and God's promises. But Elizabeth is the main character in this part of the story, as she welcomes her relative Mary into her home. They bond over their respective pregnancies and the mutual disbelief that they would both be expecting at the same time, with such powerful, God-given pregnancies. Elizabeth senses that the baby Mary is carrying is the promised Messiah and Savior, and proclaims this truth as she feels it in her own belly. Her baby leapt for joy at the presence of Mary and Jesus, and their shared faith gives them both excitement and strength, and confidence in God's presence with them.

The stories and proclamations of Elizabeth and Mary are unique and powerful in many ways, beginning with the fact that they are both the main, speaking characters in these stories, from whose perspective the stories are told. As I tell my Confirmation students and Bible Study folks, when women are named and they speak in the Bible, pay attention! It's rare to have both a named woman and a woman who has dialogue in the Bible, given the patriarchal nature of the society at that time and beyond.

Mary's words and Mary's voice are what form the basis of the Magnificat, the powerful song that makes up the second part of today's Gospel. This Magnificat is deep and enduring praise for the God who does wondrous things and is indeed love itself. So often in this time women were not given voices, they were talked about or talked at, rather than talked with, or really listened to.

Oftentimes, when we hear songs, like in the Psalms too, the words are coming from the perspective of the human, the personal experience of God that the person was called to share. So in this case, we highlight Mary's experience like we rarely see in scripture, and that lifting up of Mary, the mother of Jesus' experience, gives even more power and recognition to the words she proclaims themselves.

Women's voices are powerful. It is the voice of Mary, a woman, who gave praise to God in the midst of Jesus growing and becoming the human Savior he is for all of us. It is the voices of the faithful women at the tomb who are the very first to proclaim the good news of the risen Jesus Christ. It is the voices of women who give us stories of saving countless people, from the Egyptian midwives who saved Hebrew babies from being killed by Pharaoh and his government, to Esther saving her Hebrew people through bold action, to the deacons Lydia and Phoebe who provided radical, risky hospitality to the early church leaders, and beyond. It's the voice of Elizabeth which affirms and praises the Savior Jesus even from his earliest moments within Mary. God chooses to reveal who God is through the words and witness, hospitality and hearts, courage and conviction, actions and aspirations, bravery and boldness of women throughout the Scriptures,

and for this revelation of who God chooses and who God calls us to be even now, we give unending thanks.

God calls us to embody the traits of these faithful women who, even with all the odds stacked against them, lived in a way that loved and praised God and actionably showed love for their neighbors. And God shows up for all people, especially those who perpetually feel that the odds are against them. A huge part of Mary's song of praise, the magnificat, is lifting up God's actions of bringing down the powerful from their thrones, sending the rich away empty, and scattering the hearts of the proud. These feel like bold statements to claim for many of us, but truly, God is on the side of the oppressed. God is on the side of the people who desperately need God's power of lifting high the lowly and those who are hungry, our siblings in need of being filled with good things. God is a God of justice, and only God can bring about that kind of holy and divine justice, the new creation that comes from God's responsive actions. These are the actions that Mary praises, that God is great and merciful and holy, especially to her, a servant of God, a humble person who takes one of the greatest actions possible to bring God's love in the world in a tangible way.

So friends, I pray that as you encounter these moments of both trepidation and joy, as you take actions that will change your life and the lives of those around you, that you will know God is with you. The greatest things in life often come from these moments when it seems like our minds and feelings are at odds, but through these challenging moments we grow. When we have the courage to say yes when that excitement is there in the midst of fear, the world as we know it can certainly change.

It took the powerful, courageous yes of two unlikely women in ancient Israel to bring about the savior of the world, Jesus himself, and thanks be to God for the life-saving gift of their faith and their yes. I pray that as we grow in our faith, we know that God is with us throughout our journey, and that the whole of the human experience is understood and blessed by God himself. We know this great power of love through Jesus Christ, God's only Son, the promised Messiah, who is coming so very soon. Praise be to God for Jesus, born to the powerful courageous Mary. May we embody her

courage, her faith, and her affirmation of God in every time and place.
Thanks be to God, Amen.