

# The Mess is the Message

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This is the 4<sup>th</sup> and last Sunday of Advent. Prepare the way of the Lord. Prepare your hearts. Get ready. Jesus Christ is coming.

*“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? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” (NRSV)*

I like orderly. I like neat and organized. It’s easy for me to see when offices, retail stores or kids rooms are a disorganized mess. Remember when micro-wave ovens became relatively affordable and more common? Back in the 1980’s we purchased a new “state of the art microwave” that was the size of a small truck. One of our first forays into microwave cooking was to make a meatloaf and insert a cooking probe into it. We read the directions, set the timer and left. When we returned home about an hour and a half later, we were greeted by thick whitish gray smoke roiling out of the garage as the door came up. There was no fire, just a shrunken, blackened, hard as concrete blob of former meat loaf, still smoking from its cooking in the microwave at a temperature hotter than the surface of the sun.

We called the insurance agent who promptly arrived and told me that we would need draperies, carpets, furniture all professionally cleaned. Walls needed to be repainted, clothes laundered and dry cleaned. Books, lamps, nick nacs all were affected by the smoke that permeated even my closed top dresser drawer. Frankly it was a mess. Dealing with the fire department, insurance adjusters, contractors, painters and spouse. What did I learn? The mess was the message. Sometimes our life plans get changed with abrupt and disconcerting suddenness.

Sometimes the Mess, the aftermath, the disorganization of life leads us to fall on our knees and cry out to God for comfort, discernment, direction, and relief in His grace.

Today’s text is sometimes called “The Visitation.” Mary, the mother of Jesus has gotten some “good” messy news. She is pregnant, but not married. OH yeah, and claims to still be a virgin. Don’t you imagine that this unexplained, unexpected, unpredicted pregnancy is going to make her teenage life a mess? Local tongues wagging, people talking, reputation in jeopardy. This is a shame culture. What shames a person, shames the clan. Mary’s life is not neat and proper now. Now her life and the reputation of her clan, her family is in messy turmoil.

The text tells us that Mary runs to see Elizabeth. (ns. 36.) “And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son: and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” Mary reacts to the great news of conception in old age messily unexpected, and conception at an unmarried juncture in a young life. Two ends of the spectrum. Mary is now heading south into a funnel like telling of her story. Big picture to smaller picture. She goes to

the hill country, then to a village in Judea, then to the house of Zechariah, and finally to Elizabeth, her married, formerly barren and childless cousin.

Mary was not told to go visit Elizabeth, instead her reaction upon learning that she is pregnant with the Son of God, is one of questioning, then joy. She goes to tell Elizabeth the news. Can you imagine that conversation? Mary saying, "Elizabeth, guess what, I'm pregnant." Elizabeth knows Mary is betrothed, not yet married. Elizabeth is expectantly waiting to hear the details of this mess, just as Elizabeth is herself expectant with child, John the Baptizer.

Mary knows that she is going to talk to a cousin whose life is not orderly and neat either. Elizabeth is the wife of Zechariah, one who serves in the temple, a priest. Now he was struck mute as part of the prophecy that Gabriel invoked on Zechariah for his unfaithfulness in disbelieving that his apparently barren wife of many years would become pregnant. Sounds a bit like Sarah and Abraham and the three visitors in Genesis, right?

Life is going to get messy with the new baby. For both women. Both women will have sons who do the work of God, and both die, one beheaded, one crucified for my sins. For your sins.

Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting and before she can answer her, the unborn baby John leaps in his mother Elizabeth's womb. Leaping for joy, knowing that God has sent the Messiah. Jeremiah 1:5 "*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.*"....It's Advent time, preparation time for the coming of this new life. Not just for these families, but for your life, your family as well.

People of God, anytime a baby comes home, your life is gonna change, big time. Strollers, diapers, spit up cloths, pediatrician visits, shots. Midnight feedings, what a mess, what a load of work, what a joy, a delight, and blessing.

I like that in the midst of these two women approaching each other with love, and joy, there is the Holy Spirit at work. Verse 41, "*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."* That is the power of God speaking through Elizabeth. Elizabeth is Spirit filled, empowered to speak boldly, to ask "Why me?" "But to still rejoice in the love of God.

This is what I call a "fixin to" moment. Elizabeth is "fixin to" prophecy about Mary's blessedness. Mary is "fixin to" tell Elizabeth about her own news of a pending birth of the Son of God.

Both of these women's lives were turned upside down. One who had planned on not having kids after so many barren, childless years? Did Elizabeth finally accept her life in her safe, predictable no children routine? She is going to be a mother. Woo-Hoo! How messy is that. My friend Jack in Midland remarried at 50 and at age 56, his wife told him, "Jack, guess what I'm pregnant." Jack was ecstatic. He is a great dad second time around. His life changed from thinking about his grown up kids and grandkids, and eventual retirement, to play dough, camp outs, mud pies, and school plays.

Mary, she was probably looking to be betrothed to a stable kind of guy, a "tekton" in the Greek, a craftsman of wood, in a prearranged marriage to Joseph. She must have known that her life would be relatively routine, maybe even mundane. But to have this news dropped in your lap. You're pregnant by the power of the Spirit? And guess what; your baby is the Messiah, Emmanuel, God with us? How is that for a heck of a mess?

Life for us can be messy. Ministry is interruption. I have my “To Do” list on my desk and typically have lots of other needs that are interjected on top of my to do list that supersede MY wants and desires. Helping the man who needs rent is messy. Helping the woman and kids get shelter can be messy. Marital discord at home is messy. Deployments overseas, new job locations, serious change in living arrangements can be messy. Struggling to keep a job can be messy with politics, gamesmanship, or the threat of a looming layoff. Here is a video clip of how life itself intersected some of the folks in our congregation. **(Video CLIP of Dennis Carpenter)**

We can too often play the “What if” game in our lives. What if I don’t get the scholarship, what if the economy craters, what if I get sick? What if the crop fails or I don’t find work soon? What if this happens or that happens?

You see God is found in the midst of all that we do. God is found in the great “Jesus is coming and you’re there moments,” and in the “should I pull over, turn around, and help that guy push his truck out of the middle of the road?” events.

Mary modeled humility to answering God’s call on her life and she modeled faith in God’s providence, even though it was not in her plan or any other plan she had ever heard of.

In our testimony this morning, we were able to see how some people in this faith community have engaged in the messy message of life. God through Jesus Christ expects that we will visit the sick, bind up wounds, seek the lost, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and give a cup of cool water to the one who thirsts. Life can be messy. And we as Christians are called to be in the midst of it.

A story is told of a pagan who asked a rabbi, "Why did God speak to Moses from the flaming creosote bush?" You see, the pagan thought God should have spoken instead with a peal of thunder and lightning on the peak of some majestic mountain. The rabbi answered, "God spoke through the lowly creosote bush to teach you that there is no place on Earth where God's glory is not, not even in a humble creosote bush in the wilderness."

Life right now for many folks is messy, frantic, and a rush. Maybe even disappointing? Maybe gifts have not arrived in the mail yet, or gifts have not been purchased yet. Maybe Money is tight, and there will be few if any gifts under the tree. Sometimes the realities of life confront us, right up in our faces and attempt to rob the joy of the season from us.

Jesus Christ was born in a small, cramped, congested messy place. A new born baby was out of place, out of sync amid the animals. Mucky straw, sneaking vermin, the spilled grain, all the usual sights, smells and sounds found in a stable. But the mess is the message of Christmas! Jesus comes to us not in this palace of pearl, ivory, diamonds or gold. No Jesus came to us in the meanest of circumstances.

Hear me Church. There is no stable, no place, no home, no country that is too poor, too remote, too broken, too outcast, too different, or too “other”, that God cannot be found and formed in us there. Just as God chose young Mary and barren Elizabeth, so too the Lord chooses you, to be used for Him.

Even in the midst of the busy booming cacophony of Christmas marketing and last minute rushing around, we can find the voice of the Christ. God can draw close to your life and your heart at this time of Christmas. Whether your life feels like it is going up in flames like some overly cooked micro waved toxic meatloaf, whether pressures at work, at home, or school, between loved ones or friends

seem to be a mess, hear these words: Open up to it; rejoice in the mess and its message. Christ comes to your heart and brings salvation and love and redemption with His grace.

The message for us is this; Christ is coming ...prepare your hearts. Christ comes to us where **he finds us** in our messy and wacky lives, in our organized and disorganized lives. Christ comes to us to tell us that we are loved, we are forgiven, we are His children, and that He brings us peace, love and grace. Let God's son, the Christ, do great things for you in this season. Let Jesus Christ meet you in the real mess of your life.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Would you pray with me?