

Student Work

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Believing Together

Shelbi Gesch
Dordt College

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Believing Together

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Shelbi Gesch

It seems reasonable that when the angel Gabriel told Zechariah the news that they would soon be parents despite their advanced age, he was dubious. “How can I be sure of this?” he asked, and, given an answer, he was left quite literally speechless. It’s an amusing thought: old Zechariah, returned home from his temple service struck with silence, wildly gesturing to his wife, attempting to communicate the angel’s incredible news. It must have been the most bizarre game of charades in Scriptural history.

But as the promise became undeniably true within Elizabeth’s body, so she also exiled herself in silence. Her empty womb no longer her shame, she responded not by public celebration, jubilantly announcing her pregnancy, but with deep gratitude and reflection. For five months, she secluded herself from the public as the promised child grew daily within her, a secret between the three: Zechariah, Elizabeth, and God.

Until Mary came to visit.

And then, her joy was uncontainable. Fresh from the experience of her own improbable pregnancy, Elizabeth met Mary’s news with unrestrained joy, and the yet-to-be-born infant John joined in the celebration. In the passage, Elizabeth greets Mary with this blessing:

“Blessed woman, who believed what God said, believed every word would come true!”

Elizabeth knew something about this kind of belief. She’d spent the previous few months in seclusion, watching her aging body change and grow with the constant reminder of the miracle taking place within her, daily letting God teach her heart to hope after years of disappointment. Elizabeth’s benediction gives voice to this quality of Mary: a willingness to believe a difficult blessing, to bear not only her own doubt, but also the doubt of those around her. It must have been a balm for Mary’s soul to be met with joy at the news that likely was met with shame and doubt in her own hometown. But Elizabeth believed God, and therefore, she believed Mary.

In Gabriel’s postscript mention of Elizabeth’s pregnancy to Mary, God provided Mary with a community of belief. It was the reminder we all long to hear when faced with a difficult situation: “You’re not alone.” I believe that God knew this was exactly what Mary needed, that she would need this kind of uplifting and encouragement to find a place within her own heart to “treasure up” these days of her pregnancy, to find a place of hope beyond the fear of the unknown future, beyond all the daily discomforts of pregnancy, beyond the stares and skepticism of her community. God knew this was what Mary needed – time away, as Elizabeth had taken, to learn how to push away the fear, ponder the miracle and return it in a song of praise.

Despite the differences in their situations – the unlikely pregnancy of an old woman who bore the shame of barrenness for years and the completely impossible pregnancy of a young unwed virgin – these two women faced many of the same challenges as first-time mothers. Any mom will tell you that having another mother available as a comfort, support, and mentor through the wonderful and frightening days of early pregnancy is a precious thing. I imagine they shared many of the “Is this normal?” sort of conversations that I recall having with the older mothers in my community when my first child was on her way. God knew exactly what Mary needed, and He provided.

Elizabeth paved the way for Mary in a similar way to that which her son prepared for the Savior. She had a sensitivity to the importance of the task she was given in mothering the child growing inside her, perhaps a sensitivity she wouldn’t have had as a younger woman. At her place in life, Elizabeth knew the value of solitude and knew that the task of raising a son with such an important calling was sobering.

However, she also knew that a celebration of faith was called for when she saw Mary coming to her door. Perhaps she'd saved her joy for that moment, when a frightened young Mary came to her with her incredible news. Perhaps Mary would need to lean on her confidence and hope, not only that their long-awaited Messiah would come, but that the word of the angel to Mary was true, and that His coming was more imminent than either of them could have hoped for.

There was a celebration of impossible faith at Elizabeth's house that day, two women believing together and finding joy past the doubt and fear. As I think of that celebration, I remember my friend, Andrea.

She came to Bible study one Tuesday morning with a peculiar look in her eyes – a little lost in thought, a little questioning, a little excited, and a lot afraid. I know that look, but I'd not seen it on someone for some time – it's the look I recognize as God at work, doing something in a life-changing way. And I've learned: when you see that look in someone, keep watching. *Aslan*, as they say in Narnia, *is on the move*.

Over the next few weeks, in a series of prayer requests, Andrea revealed what God was up to. She and her now-husband had found themselves unexpectedly pregnant in high school, but miscarried that first child. Remembering her own feelings of grief and loneliness, she began seeing a need in our community to support teenage moms. She'd been encouraged by our Mothers of Preschoolers group in our little town, and she felt God pulling on her heart to start one for teen moms in a nearby town.

It was a huge proposition. No one had started a group like this before in our area. At first, she had no idea what to do or how to do it, only that it needed to be done. But she did it, following God's leading step-by-step with the help of another friend, a widowed mom with young ones, someone who knew the everyday struggles that these moms were facing as single mothers.

I've watched over the years since then as God has transformed mourning into joy, ashes into beauty, in pictures of dozens of young moms with a hope renewed, with a light in their eyes, with a support system because they, like Mary with Elizabeth, had someone who believed together with them that in God, all things are possible, that hope still shines through darkness, and that joy can be found even in unlikely places.