

WGUMC December 20, 2015  
Luke 1:39-45, 56

"The Journey is Home"

Finals are over and my daughter is all geared up to do absolutely nothing for the next two weeks. I'm glad I don't have finals anymore, but I remember that glorious feeling you have when you are done with them. I'd tell her that it's even better in college when you stay up five nights in a row, drink 1700 cups of coffee, sit for your last exam, turn in your last term paper, throw your dirty laundry in a bag and use your last ounce of energy to climb into a car, bus or plane and head home so mom can cook and clean for you while you do nothing but eat and sleep and sleep and sleep. Right now that sounds pretty good to me.

As I was coming to the end of chemo a few months ago, it was feeling like finals week all over again, and I couldn't help yearning to go home. We haven't been to Colorado for Christmas in years and my parents are getting up there. I don't know how many more years we'll have together. So in my mind,

I began to plan how I would get home and let myself dream about mommy taking care of me.

No matter how old we are, something in all of us wants mommy to take care of us. We'd gladly give up our responsibilities. We'd love it if someone would do our work for us and clean up after us. But there comes a time in our lives when we realize that no one is going to do that for us anymore. A few weeks ago, my mom fell in the dining room and broke her wrist. So, yes, I'll be going to Colorado for Christmas, not so that mommy can take care of me, but so that I can take care of my mom.

If you've ever been a part of the sandwich generation, you know exactly what I'm feeling and maybe something of what Mary was feeling. In our reading this morning, Mary has just found out that she is pregnant. She's very young and scared. If she could, I bet that she'd want to go home and have mommy take care of her. It's still early in the pregnancy and

she's not yet over the emotional shock of learning that she is going to be a mother, let alone the physical shock as her body begins to adjust to this new reality.

But regardless of how bad the morning sickness may be, Mary goes with haste to a Judean town in the hill country to visit a cousin. Instead of going home so that her mother could take care of her, Mary faithfully goes to take care of Elizabeth who is already in her sixth month. Elizabeth is old to be a mother, but she is carrying a child whose name will be John and who will be known as the Baptizer. Mary stays with Elizabeth about three months, until the baby is born.

Now the time Mary spends with Elizabeth is no doubt good training for motherhood, for caretaking and homemaking. Those three months teach Mary that, for mothers, home is not where you go to have someone take care of you. Home is what happens when you take care of others. Whether she knows it or not, Mary is just starting out on a long journey called home.

We know very little about Mary's life, but she shows up in different places in the Gospels and wherever she is, she is taking care of someone. She went from Nazareth in Galilee all the way to the hill country of Judea to take care of Elizabeth. Then she went with Joseph to Bethlehem to give birth to Jesus. Then she and Joseph took Jesus and fled to Egypt to escape King Herod. They returned to Nazareth after Herod died and raised their son there. When Jesus was twelve, they took him to Jerusalem and found him days later in his Father's house, talking with some teachers.

Even after Jesus was grown, Mary kept showing up in his life. She went with Jesus to a wedding in Cana and prompted him to turn water into wine. Later, she travelled to Capernaum because she wanted to talk with him. Did she try to get him to come home and not go to Jerusalem? We don't know. But we do know that her long journey of loving eventually took her to Calvary.

Mary lived her whole life, or what we know of it, loving and caring for her son. She never convinced him to come home to Nazareth, but she found a home in bringing her love to him wherever he was, whether he was lying in a manger or hanging from a cross.

Mother Mary's journey of constant selfless loving is often held up as a model for how the rest of us should love. The ones who do it best are sometimes called saints. There's a reason that Teresa of Calcutta was called "Mother." But we don't have to be a saint or a mother to love as Mary loved. Mary's journey is our journey. But for that to be true, we have to make one correction to the tradition.

Because of the cross, Mary is usually portrayed in art as a sad creature even when she's smiling. Her eyes are downcast and her hand is over her heart and she has a look that says, "I'm about to faint." But don't let all those maudlin Madonna's make you think that a life of caring for others is too hard and

too full of heartache for mere mortals to bother with. I wish that the Mary I see in churches would look more like the woman I hear singing, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me..." [Luke 1:47-49]

When Mary came to care for Elizabeth, she sang a song of joy. When she greeted her cousin, the child in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy. And I believe that that's exactly what God is doing when we take care of each other: the God inside us leaps for joy.

God loves Christmas even more than we do, not because of the merry-making, the gift giving, or the caroling. Christmas gives God joy because in this season, we make more of an effort to love as Mother Mary does, by caretaking and homemaking. Every day in the newspaper, there's another story of some person or organization that our community is

caring for. And every Monday, we gather here to plan how we can make a home for a few vulnerable people this winter.

I know that God is leaping for joy every time we hear from another congregation that wants to join the collaborative. But I also suspect that God is wondering: Why? Why does it take a weather crisis to get us to live the gift of Christmas? Why can't we love like Mary all the year through? The rain is here and we have a lot of caring and loving to do. And it is kind of scary because we have a sense that this is just the beginning of a very long journey. It will be hard and sometimes heartbreaking. But the story of Mary reminds us that this journey is our home and God's joy will be our traveling companion.