

There is a scourge plaguing this country. And I'm not talking about the Zika virus, the heroin epidemic, cancer or the Kardashian family. No, the silent sickness that has descended upon America today is loneliness.

For one thing, more and more people are living alone. For the first time in American history, there are more single adults than married adults. And a Duke University study found that 25% of Americans have no social support at all, meaning that they don't have a single person that they feel they can confide in. If that isn't bad enough, over half of the population doesn't have a real friend outside of their immediate family.

[*Psychology Today*, 2009]

Social isolation is a very big problem, no matter your age or marital status, and it is decidedly bad for your health. People who are socially isolated are twice as likely to die prematurely. The lack of social support impairs your immune system and

boosts inflammation that can lead to increased risk for arthritis, diabetes and heart disease. It is also a huge risk factor for major depression and addiction.

In many ways, social isolation is the by-product of modern life. And while some think that social media make us feel less isolated, the evidence suggests that the amount of time we spend on Facebook is inversely proportional to how happy we feel on any given day. [Slate.com]

And what about the time we spend alone in our cars? Robert Putnam, the sociologist and author of *Bowling Alone*, says that every ten minutes added to our commute corresponds to a 10% decrease in social ties.

I could go on, but you get the picture. There are a whole lot of lonely people out there. Men have an especially hard time. I was struck by a study in which researchers asked men for the names and addresses of their very close friends, for instance, people they could go to and borrow money from if they got

into trouble. They discovered that a lot of the guys' "close friends" where people they hadn't contacted in years and in a few cases, were people that had died without them knowing about it!

So I have a lot of empathy for guys who are feeling alone. Women do seem to have an easier time of it, and the story of Mary in our Gospel reading this morning tells us why. If you remember from last week, Mary was visited by the Angel Gabriel who told her that she was going to have a child and that the father of her child was not Joseph but the Holy Spirit. This was a bit of a shock and before Mary could begin to process this news, the angel disappeared.

Mary was alone. Very alone. It would have been nice for the angel to have stayed long enough to be with her when she told Joseph. What would their families say? What would the leaders of the town say? Even more frightening, what would they do? Getting pregnant before marriage was a life or death

matter in that part of the world. And there were no witnesses to this encounter with the angel. No one to vouch for her. No one would believe her. Mary was on her own.

What could she do? What would any woman do if she found herself in an impossible situation? She would go find another woman, a sister, a cousin. Mary had a cousin, Elizabeth, who just happened to be pregnant, too. Maybe the mother of the child who would grow up to be John the Baptist would understand. So, "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."

At first, I wondered why the author of Luke included this little domestic scene. Elizabeth hears Mary's voice and the child in her womb leaps for joy. Then Elizabeth says to Mary, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?"

Scholars would probably explain the scene by saying that Luke wanted to show how John the Baptist and Jesus were connected even in the womb. And, as the Gospels indicate, there was some rivalry between the disciples of John and Jesus, so Luke wants to make it clear that the Lord is Jesus, not John.

But I think there is another reason for including this little story about Mary and Elizabeth in the big story of Jesus. And that is to remind us that, when it comes to living the life God wants us to live, we can't do it alone. We need each other and we are far better together.

In Chapter One, compare the Mary of the Annunciation with the Mary of the Magnificat. From verse 26 to verse 46, Mary undergoes an incredible transformation. First she is perplexed and afraid when the angel appears. Then she goes to visit Elizabeth who greets her and blesses her. Now she is affirmed and empowered and breaks out into a song of praise: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my

Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name."

But how did Mary get from puny to powerful? From anxious to assertive? From virgin to victorious? Of course, her power came from God, but I believe that she found the courage to use it in community. She found her voice in sisterhood. And with the blessing she got from Elizabeth, she belted out her power song.

Did you listen to the words of that song? In the recent election, people said that they voted for change. But politicians take note: nothing the President-elect has said he is going to do is as radical as what Mary was saying that God has already done: "He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good

things, and sent the rich away empty." No one in Washington today wants to hear Mary's song, but someone has to sing it.

By the blessing and the strength of our sisterhood and brotherhood in Christ, we can claim that power and sing that song. We are not alone and whenever we come together in the name of God, great things get done.

I don't know how many of you have been following the events at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in the Dakotas. Native peoples there have opposed the building of an oil pipeline that would pass right under their water supply. It originally was going to pass by the predominantly white city of Bismark, but it was rerouted for safety reasons. Apparently, the safety of European Americans is more important than the safety of Native Americans.

It was a group of Lakota women who first came together to protect the water. In April, they set up Sacred Stones Camp, and by the end of the summer, their group had grown from

seven tipis to include several thousand people from all over the country and from all walks of life. In September, the first baby was born in the camp. She was named, Mni Wiconi or "water is life" in Lakota.

After bulldozers dug up burial sites and pipeline security guards attacked the protestors/protectors with mace, tear gas and rubber bullets, one young Lakota woman was asked how she thought they were going to stop the company that was bringing the big "black snake" to the reservation? She said, "We are a spiritually grounded people. We believe our ultimate weapon is prayer."

And pray they did, daily. They were joined by Christians, Muslims, Jews, people of all religions and no religion at all. As the weather became bitter cold, the women held on. Then, following an interfaith service last Sunday, they got the news that their prayers had been answered. The Army refused to

issue the final permit and a spokesperson said that they will consider alternate routes.

The women who stood together at Standing Rock must have felt like singing. And, though I don't know the language, the words of their song might sound a lot like Mary's song. For the Lakota women know what Mary and Elizabeth knew: We are not alone and whenever we come together in the name of God, great things get done.

Luke tells his story of Mary and Elizabeth and I tell you a story of the women of Standing Rock because like them you're going to find yourself in an impossible situation or up against incredible opposition one of these days. There is going to be a time when your angel comes, drops a bomb and leaves you and you feel alone. But the truth is: you are not alone. At least you don't have to be. You don't have to be stuck in that situation. The Mighty One is always ready to do great things in and for you. All you have to do is what Mary did. She reached out to

one person. The mother of Jesus and the mother of John the Baptist got together and started a revolution.

We are not alone. At Christmas time, let this be our creed.

Let's say it together: #883

We are not alone, we live in God's world.
We believe in God:
who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh,
to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others by the Spirit.
We trust in God.
We are called to be the church:
to celebrate God's presence,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.
In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.
We are not alone.
Thanks be to God. Amen.