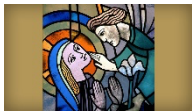


*Grace and peace to you in God who is our father and our mother,
and in Jesus Christ, our savior and our friend.*



In our reading today from the gospel according to Luke, we enter into the story of the birth of Jesus immediately after the visitation—the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Mary announcing that she will bear a child through the Holy Spirit.

What a shock it must have been to Mary – young, betrothed but not married – and told not only that she would bear a son, but that he would be the Son of God.

She must have wondered – how will this happen?
what will people think?
Why me?

She must have been anxious, but also, perhaps, thrilled at the thought – a son! God's son!

She must have been full of questions and worries and hopes.

In her essay “The God Bearer,” author and educator Debie Thomas reflects on this visitation and what comes after – or rather, what doesn't come after.

When I read Luke's account of the Annunciation, I can't help but wonder what might have happened if Gabriel stuck around after Mary's yes. How different her experience would have been if the angel had said, “you know what, Mary? The next nine months are going to be rough for you. Shoot, the next thirty years are going to be rough for you! I think I'll take a leave of absence from heaven, camp out down here, and stick by you for a while. If anyone has an issue with your pregnancy or with your child, you can refer them to me.

But that's not how the story unfolds. Mary doesn't get a shining sidekick after the Annunciation. The glow fades, the angel departs, and Mary is left to do the ongoing work of discernment and discipleship on her own. I imagine there are days when Mary longs for Gabriel to come back and reassure her. When she pleads with God to give her critics some

irrefutable proof that she isn't delusional, that the child growing in her body is in fact the Christ.

We know what that feels like, don't we? We've all been there. We've all experienced the moment after the yes – the moment when the glowing mountaintop experience dissolves into memory, and we are left to obey God in the muck of life down in the valley.

In this moment – when the angel is gone and the reality of her situation dawns
– Mary finds a gift to give her strength



Part of Gabriel's announcement is the revelation that Mary's cousin Elizabeth has also conceived a son.

So Mary sets out right away to see her cousin Elizabeth.

Elizabeth welcomes her with sheer, unbridled joy.

They share an experience of being chosen to bear sons
who are sent to do God's work in the world.

They share a history of relationship as cousins, and perhaps friends.

Not all of their experience is shared, but they encounter one another with care
and mutual support, and Mary stays with Elizabeth for three months.

What Mary finds in Elizabeth is abundant blessing,
the shared joy and blessing that comes from connection, companionship,
and a shared journey.

We know that, whatever we are going through, God is with us.

And we know also that sometimes we need something else.

We need companions on the journey of faith, the journey of life.

We need people who share our experiences,
who listen with compassion to our stories.

Scripture is full of such companions, who journey together in mutual care:

Mary and Elizabeth

Ruth and Naomi,

David and Jonathon

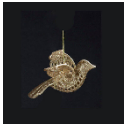
Paul and Silas

Jesus and his disciples

Communities of faith can provide such connections for us.

When we are encouraged to share our stories, our struggles and our joys.

When we learn and pray and serve together.
Sometimes we connect over shared experience,
 such as parenthood, or aging, or grief.
And sometimes we connect across differences,
 of age or experience or background,
 knowing we share a commitment to following Jesus.



In the Journey Project study guide, for the Journey to Community, Pastor and author Lynne Hinton shares this story:

It was a gathering of the broken, the bereaved, the sorrowful, coming together for a simple holiday service. As the chaplain for hospice it seemed important to offer a time of remembrance for members of the families of our deceased patients, a chance to say that in light of their recent loss we acknowledge that for them this is no season of happy holidays.

We lit candles, rang a bell, said prayers, and called out the names of the dead. A few words of comfort were shared, silence, a little piano music, and the giving of small gifts, tree ornaments, doves, the symbol of peace, that were made of rigid green wire and covered in a thin layer of gold glitter.

I had not thought too much about the consequences of giving out things coated in glitter. It had not occurred to me that the decoration was flimsy and would spread from fingers to hair to cheeks and fronts of blouses. But spread it did. So, that after the service, after the sharing of butter cookies and cups of hot cider, handshakes, the gentle conversations, the reunion of beloved hospice staff and the bereaved family members, all of us sparkled with gold glitter. All of us were altered and yet also the same, marked by our grief, marked by our brokenness, marked with tiny lines of glistening gold glitter.

Seeing everyone shining that way touched me. Seeing the Spirit of God break forth in that way surprised me. Of course, it shouldn't have. We are all broken, after all. We all face loss; we all grieve. We all deal with disappointment and sadness, often forgetting that as we walk, we do so among the wounded. We are all stumbling forward the best we can and it is, I believe, because of our brokenness that we are able to recognize the

sorrow and grief of others. It is in our own frail attempts to move beyond the sadness that we are able to see so many others struggling beside us. And somehow, the sharing of this commonality brings us a measure of peace, of hope, a silver lining in the dark and overwhelming bank of clouds that cover us. Or as it was at this hospice memorial service on this mild December day in a little town in western New Mexico, tiny lines of gold glitter marking us all as one.



We are living in a time when connection is hard to come by.

Our public discussions are polarized and often angry.

Loneliness has been identified by some as an epidemic in our society.

As people of God, we are not immune from these challenges.

But, as people of God, we are invited into a different reality.

We are reminded that each person we encounter is covered in the glittering fingerprints of God, who made each one of us in God's own image.

We are reminded that God asks us to live in mutual support
and encouragement – sharing both our sorrows and our joys.

We gather as a community of faith to worship together, sing together,
pray together, eat together, and learn together.

And we gather to practice the unity we have in our faith
to practice listening to one another and supporting one another
that we may live more fully as God's people in the world.

May our journey of faith take us more deeply into community
and care for one another,
practicing God's love here and in the world around us.

Amen.