

*Pastor Jana Schofield
Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA
Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 19, 2021
Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:46b-55; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45*

I think I've mentioned in sermons before that I'm part of a book group that meets monthly and discusses some really interesting books. But I don't know if I've told you the story of how I was invited to be part of the group. At my installation service at Christ Lutheran in July 2011, a woman I didn't know came up to me after the service and said something to the effect that I seemed like the kind of person who would fit in well to the book group that she hosted.

That woman was Lisa Cornwell, whom many of you know as she served as our interim youth minister a couple years ago. I was honored she was asking me to join her book group, but it's what she said next that really intrigued me.

She said, almost apologetically, "But there's a caveat. Each time we meet we first sit around and drink wine and talk about our lives, so sometimes we don't even get to discussing the book." Here I was, new to Ferndale, new to Washington state, and I was being invited to have friends! And drink wine! And talk about my life! And maybe even discuss some good books! For this extrovert it was like Christmas in July! And for the last 10½ years, my book group has been one of the greatest blessings of my life.

Most of the women of my book group are Christian and many of them are even Lutheran, and it is clear God has worked through them as they have walked with me through sadness and pain, through life transitions and education, through milestones and celebrations. They have pronounced blessings on me both in times of need and times of joy, they have helped me see more clearly how God is working in my life and in the world, and they have helped me to trust in what God will do in the future.

And yes, most of the time we have even discussed the book we read that month!

I thought about my book group when I encountered again our gospel story and psalm today—the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, and Mary's Magnificat which she sang on Elizabeth's doorstep. It's a story where the focal point is two women—which is rare in scripture to begin with—sharing about their lives, blessing one another, noticing more clearly how God is at work in their lives and the world, and trusting what God will do in the future.

This is one of my favorite passages in scripture, and perhaps it is for you, too. It's a story that many women especially can relate with—it's about the real experience of pregnancy and the sharing of common experiences.

What I find so interesting is that immediately in the Gospel of Luke after the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will bear the son of God, immediately she connects with another woman, her cousin Elizabeth, to share her experience. In fact, the gospel says she went with haste—running over the Judean hills bursting with news to tell her cousin—and when she arrived, the elderly Elizabeth who was miraculously pregnant herself welcomed her with astonishment and pronounced a blessing on Mary. And right after Mary received that blessing, she sang of how clearly she saw God working in her life, and in the world—casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty. And Mary proclaimed that she trusted in what God was doing in the future—coming to the aid of God's servant, to remember the promise of mercy to Abraham and his children forever. It was within the context of Mary connecting and sharing with another person that Mary received a blessing, saw more clearly what God was doing in her life and in the world, and trusted what God was doing in the future.

Of course, we don't know exactly what happened during the three months Mary stayed with Elizabeth. But no doubt they sat around the fire or candlelight at night, like my book group does, talking about their lives. Writer Debie Thomas wonders if these are the questions they pondered: "Will Joseph stick around? Will Zechariah speak again? Will Mary's parents disown her? Will the elderly Elizabeth live long enough to see her son reach adulthood? Will

both women survive the dangers of childbirth? Will these mysterious babies, these babies of such odd and unfathomable promise, really and truly change the world?”

Mary and Elizabeth needed one another in both their fear and their joy. And we are no different. We need one another, too, in our fear and our joy.

This past Wednesday evening at our Advent study on Zoom we talked about how impossible it is to be fully self-sufficient. We rely on other people to live—to grow our food, to create fabric and clothing, to build and maintain the homes in which we live. But we also need others to help us see more clearly how God is working in our life and in the world, and to trust what God is doing in the future. It is in community that we realize that we are not alone, that we remember what God has done, that we increase our trust in the promise of what God will do.

At our best the church provides what Mary and Elizabeth experienced—what I experience in my book group with other Christians—we experience blessings both in times of need and times of joy, we see more clearly how God is working in our life and in the world, we increase our trust for what God will do in the future. This is the place where we remind one another that if God can come in a humble baby to turn the world upside down, God can come to turn things around in your life, too.

That’s what a church is for. And in our church, that’s especially what our Stephen Ministry is for. Our trained Stephen Ministers listen and help you discover where God is at work. They are God’s heart for you when you are grieving or trying to discern what to do or worried about yourself or another.

And so if you are finding this season that you need someone to listen, to provide support, to remind you what God about has done and what God can do, please reach out to me or to Dave Schlack, our new Stephen Leader, to be paired with a Stephen Minister who will meet with you weekly, or take advantage of the Stephen Ministry prayer station that the Stephen Ministers are reinstating today in the coat room at the back of the sanctuary both during the

next hymn and also during communion. You can tell them confidentially what’s going on in your heart and life, they will listen without judgement, and then pray for you, and keep praying for you throughout this season.

When you connect and share with others in the church, you will see, like Mary, how God has done great things for you. You will experience God working through the words and presence of others. And you will be assured that you are not alone. That the one who we are waiting for this Advent has already come near, and loves you without end. Amen.