

## Luke 3:7-18 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>7</sup>John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup>Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>9</sup>Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

<sup>10</sup>And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" <sup>11</sup>In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." <sup>12</sup>Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" <sup>13</sup>He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." <sup>14</sup>Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

<sup>15</sup>As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>16</sup>John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with<sup>[b]</sup> the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup>His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

<sup>18</sup> So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

Luke 1:39-55 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

## Mary Visits Elizabeth

<sup>39</sup> In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup> where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup> and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup> And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup> For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup> And blessed is she who believed that there would be<sup>[a]</sup> a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

## Mary's Song of Praise

<sup>46</sup> And Mary<sup>[b]</sup> said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

- <sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
- <sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;
- <sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.
- <sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,
- <sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Kerra Becker English

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Luke 3: 7-18; Luke 1: 39-55

“A Cousin’s Passion; A Mother’s Prayer”

For better or for worse, our closest family members likely have the most influence over who we become in this world. And really whether or not I tell you that I’m a lot like my mother, or absolutely nothing like my mother – her influence probably had something to do with how I respond to how much or how little I’m like her. The people who make it their life’s work to study families often send mixed messages about this. Because it doesn’t really matter if you embrace your roots or flee from your family of origin, we remain connected, attached, and play out who we are oftentimes because of who they’ve been.

This may or may not come as comforting news this time of year.

I don’t know about you, but the older I get, the more I can consider how I was raised and appreciate the good stuff and overlook the bad. Now, that’s also because my good was in fact pretty good, and the bad wasn’t totally awful. Some have a lot more to deal with in their families of origin than I do. For those folks, healing can be a much greater challenge. I believe it is always possible – but sometimes it can be very hard work.

Today, I want to talk to you about two of Jesus’ closest relatives, his cousin John and his mother Mary. Some biblical accounts seem to presume that Jesus also had siblings, but if he did, we don’t hear much about who they were. We do, however, hear about his connections with this cousin. Perhaps it was because they were so similar in age. Perhaps it was because Mary looked

to her older relative Elizabeth during her pregnancy and those early, tiring childhood years. Perhaps it was because both of them had strange angelic visitors predicting and celebrating their births. Their lives seem destined to intertwine from that moment where John “jumps” in his mother’s womb after a newly pregnant Mary walks through the door.

So what was it about John that paved the way for Jesus to follow his destiny as God’s son? He was a bit of a wild one, that cousin. I like to imagine that maybe they’d gone on a few adventures together in their youth. Surely they knew how to make each other laugh, and they probably also knew how to push each other’s buttons. I wonder how often John and Jesus talked about their futures. Did they talk about girls they liked? Did they ever fight? Did they like going to church? John’s Dad was a temple priest, and one who had been visited by an angel at that. The angel said some radical things about who John was going to be as a prophet. This boy would eventually remind God’s people of their salvation and teach them about forgiveness. Living up to that image would be mighty difficult. Thus the stereotype persists of preachers’ kids having to measure up to some unwritten and unachievable standard of perfection. I don’t know if that made Zechariah more obsessed about every little parenting move, or if it comforted him that God was aware of who John would be from the first announcement of Elizabeth’s pregnancy.

Both John and Jesus would go on to become religious authorities, but neither one fit the usual mold of the priestly class that Zechariah represented. They would be reformers. John seemed to be the rule-breaker from the get-go. Wild and free, he spent lots of time in the wilderness. He wore strange clothes and let his hair grow shaggy and long. Just about every account of his physical appearance makes me think he was probably a hippie – before the hippie trend came into being. His preaching was a bit on the salty side, rough in its language and insistent on the importance of big change, right now. He sounded so forthright and timely that

people began to wonder if he were the Messiah. But no, he was clear about that, he was not the Messiah, but he had been preparing since birth to prepare the way for the Messiah. All they had left to do was repent, to turn away from the practices that were separating them from God and see what new thing God was doing in that wilderness during their lifetimes.

Jesus at least started out a bit more subtly in his religious studies. He was known as a fantastic scholar of the scriptures and those who heard him teach, even as a young person, found his insights incredibly mature for his age. He didn't have John's harsh edges, at least not yet. But Jesus would come crosswise with some of the same people who haunted his cousin and his ministry. Neither of them were liked by Kings. They were threatening to power. Neither of them were too popular with the Pharisees. They were threatening to tradition. Both of them upset the status quo with their preaching. Both of them taught God's love, but that the path to knowing God's love came from recognizing the depth of our own sin so we could see the bounty of God's mercy. They were singing the same theological song. John's version was just a bit more twangy than Jesus.

Obviously, Jesus' cousin John had a huge impact on his chosen vocation. Perhaps having John's loud, insistent, oftentimes over the top voice in his ear kept Jesus motivated toward his ultimate goal. Knowing that his cousin sacrificed his life for standing his ground maybe gave Jesus some of his courage when his own time came to sacrifice all that he had worked for or be put to death. His cousin's passion was motivating in and of itself to garner a group of followers. Then Jesus came along and a movement was truly born.

But I think that Jesus needed more than just a fiery cousin to become the spiritual trailblazer he turned out to be. He was nurtured his whole life by his Mother's constant prayer.

Now in a number of Christian traditions, those that are “higher church” than we are, Mary is a saint. But in this case, I want us to just think about her as a mother who loves her son as the gift from God that he is. She may have had an angel to tell her how special her child was going to be, but she’s not the only mother to ever have those mixed feelings of love and sadness, knowing that your child has the ability to break your heart into a million tiny pieces.

Mary was the chosen mother. God specifically handpicked her for this ominous responsibility. I know that means she was loved by God, but that love came at a really high price. Her son would never be her own. Wise mothers realize this along the way anyhow. Our children do not belong to us. They belong to God and to the musings of the universe. We can love them, and support them, and pray for them, but what we really cannot do is control them.

She had a clear vision for who this child was going to be from the time of his stirring in her womb. The Magnificat, this Song of Mary, is part prayer, part vision, part prophecy. It reveals complete upheaval of the structure of societal norms, something that would come as a fulfillment through her son’s life. He would have to be brave, and so would she. God’s mercy would show ripples through the generations but Jesus would be bent and broken in the process. All she could do was pray. In our own time, we sometimes see this as an unsatisfying answer. We want to be in control and determine our own life outcomes. But Mary had this amazing spiritual insight that trusting in God would yield a different kind of result than trying to control her own son’s destiny.

We don’t know very much about the kind of mother she was. But like many mothers, she had to walk that line between protectiveness and permissiveness. Her son Jesus, like any other, needed both discipline and self-determination. She would have to let him grow into the man he

was meant to be, not the man who would continue Joseph's trade as a carpenter, not the man who would gain a secure life as a temple priest. Did his traveling with fishermen and tax collectors worry her or make her proud? Did she lament that having his group of disciples seemed more important than starting a family of his own? Did she pray in later years that he might have a more normal life than the one that had been chosen for him? Or was it her steadfast reminders that he was a child of the Spirit keeping him on the path to Jerusalem and the salvation of humankind?

These musings today are part biblically founded, part imaginative wonderings. I find myself curious about the people who had a close impact on Jesus because Jesus has had such an impact on the world. Who was John? Who was Mary? What were they like? And how much was Jesus like each of them?

Our relatives may be the ones who inspire us or they may be the ones who infuriate us. Maybe you had a cousin you were always getting in trouble with. Maybe your mother's prayers whispered in secret had more of an impact than you thought. Maybe it was a grandparent who taught you the true meaning of life, or a sibling who inspired you to be more courageous. The people who surround us are a gift to us, a reminder that God is present in our lives. If that isn't happening with your relatives, God gives us the church, not a perfect community by any stretch, but a real community that allows us to grow together in faithfulness and fortitude. I've learned from both relatives and church family who were saints, and sadly I've also learned that it's those who are closest to us or who are expected to "do better" who can leave us sorely disappointed in humankind. Jesus probably knew both as well. There were followers who anointed him with many blessings and followers who betrayed him, denied him, and have committed terrible acts in his name. And yet, he seemed much more to be strengthened by the former than put off by the

latter. He always showed kindness and mercy, even when he was being firm and critical. If only we could do more of the same.

So today, remember and give thanks for the people who have shaped your life in whatever way they did so: by guiding you toward paths of righteousness, by showing you the blessing of the still waters, by turning you from the shadows and into the light. Say thanks as well for Jesus' closest people, the ones who amplify his name in all the right ways. So often they are too busy doing what is good to receive thanks or credit for all they do. And offer a prayer for those who seem to be wrecking the name of Jesus – sometimes those hearts can be touched and turned when they become aware of God's great mercy. John cried out in the wilderness, Mary cried out in her heart. And I dare say it has made all the difference. Amen.