



12.21.25...Making Room, In Relationships | Luke 1:24-25

Will we make room in our lives for Advent?

Back when I was preparing to be ordained in the Covenant denomination, I attended a very memorable class called Vocational Excellence. That class was facilitated by seasoned pastors who emphasized the need for us to intentionally develop relationships. Okay.

More specifically, they explained you should develop five intentional relationships, outside the church you were serving. So that, at any given time, you would have someone to call when...
...WHEN your world, your life exploded. Not if, but when it exploded, it's going to happen, they affirmed. That's a little dark.

And they continued, each relationship had to have the depth in it in which it would be completely confidential, you could be your whole self, and they would support you and not judge you.

They went on to explain it must be five...not four or three. Because invariably, at least one will probably be sick, another might be on vacation, one might be on a date night and not able to take your call at that moment.

If you had five, odds were pretty good that at least one or two would be able to listen and pray, and help figure out some next steps.

And then the cherry on top of their teaching, they said it is considered professional "malfeasance" if you did not have five relationships in place in your life when things hit the fan. "Malfeasance" means wrongdoing. It would be viewed by your colleagues as something you had failed to do as a pastor to keep yourself healthy and safe to serve.

You can imagine how that might have stuck with a person, it hit me hard. And they were right. There were times my world exploded, I needed to call them, and their support kept me alive.

The MN Conference holds a high value on their pastors being in peer groups for just that kind of emotional, spiritual, and professional support. Naming that value "connectionism".

It is not easy to stay meaningfully connected. It takes effort, right?

We know social isolation is a major problem in our culture and perhaps even something we struggle with here at BUMC.

And how loneliness compounds other problems. More darkness, less sunlight has a real impact on our mental health, its cold, we start to hibernate and snack on too much pumpkin pie.

I'm not saying pie is a good coping mechanism. And I am binging on way too much football. How about those Bears! Sorry Packers...ouch!

What are your coping mechanisms? We all struggle with staying connected.

And we know how loneliness can be especially compounded and heightened by grief during the holiday season, right?

With Hallmark movies and their 90-minute fixes. It all just makes me sooo...hungry for more pie.

We know that many factors can lead to social isolation and loneliness, making life hard and weighing us down.

That's why it is so essential, so important to look at Mary and Elizabeth's story, as their lives intertwine leading to some hope. This text shows us how they found the strength to face their challenges.

That through relationship with one another, God creates space for both women to be blessed and supported. But first their struggles.

Immediately in Luke 1:24, we read, "...Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion." And just before this, her husband had a confusing encounter with God and lost his ability to speak.

Which would have only added to and compounded Elizabeth's sense of isolation. A severe season of seclusion and isolation.

And then, we can only speculate, maybe Elizabeth had experienced the deep grief of miscarriages. Maybe?

Maybe others pulled away from her in the roller coaster ride of pregnancy and hope and then dashed hopes. Maybe they avoided her not knowing what to say. Maybe?

But it is a pretty safe bet, she faced censure, gossip, and judgment from her own community and neighbors due to her childlessness.

You were considered cursed by God if you could not bring babies into the world. What had Elizabeth done to deserve that? Better steer clear of Elizabeth.

Mary, on the other hand, would have without doubt faced significant shunning and shame for being pregnant outside of marriage. Perhaps even outright hostility. The Torah commanded those caught in adultery to be stoned to death.

If the man could be identified, both would be stoned by the community. If only the woman could be identified, she could be stoned in front of her father's home!

Mary knew she could be put to death for her pregnancy, which makes it all the more amazing she trusted God to take care of her.

Mary would have probably sought refuge from her community in order to hide her pregnancy and/or avoid its social consequences. She would have wanted to get away from all the scandal and side glances from gossipy and judgmental neighbors. I can't even imagine.

And yet, I have heard modern day stories, I have had friends share with me they had gotten pregnant outside of marriage.

How they struggled to be accepted and supported especially by their church. Not that long ago, young girls were sent away to family far away or special homes for pregnant girls.

So, back then and even now still, this was an extremely isolating experience for young women to face.

Can you imagine the difference it would have made for Mary and Elizabeth, and many other women to have a nonjudgmental and gracious relationship to lean on?

I love this image of them together.

Some of our deepest relationships grow from shared or similar experiences. And I am grateful for a resource I read this week to note, that while Elizabeth's pregnancy would have lifted shame off her, Mary's pregnancy would have piled the shame on to a crushing degree.

And yet both of them experienced miraculous pregnancies.

Elizabeth not only provided refuge from community disapproval, but she was also someone who could celebrate the pregnancy as God's work.

We need people in our lives who get us, who get what we have gone through. We need relationships who just "get it" without having to defend, explain, or justify ourselves or our need for support.

When we have lost close significant others in our lives...we need relationships with those who have faced similar losses. God took my loved one, how can God be loving?

When we lose our jobs...we need people around us who have gone through the same disorienting and distressing experience, to help us trust that God will provide.

Similar life experiences are so helpful, but they don't have to be exact to be healing...coming alongside in solidarity, in empathy, to listen and not judge is so lifegiving.

Creating sanctuary, making space in our lives for others involves accepting the other person's experience as their own.

We will want to notice that in this text from Luke, Elizabeth does not offer Mary advice. The two had no agendas for each other but that they were simply there for one another.

They made space, made room for one another. Their meeting was a milestone on the emotional journey for each of them. God sent Mary to Elizabeth.

And while Mary's visit broke into Elizabeth's isolation and led her to express awe and joy, Elizabeth's friendship became a safe harbor for Mary's perceived shameful pregnancy.

In an attempt to bring their stories, their shared relationship a bit closer to home for us. Here are some suggestions from a resource I was looking at recently, that you might consider.

Not advice, just some ideas in making room for in your own practices this season and to consider bringing into the new year.

One, often we need someone else to bring insight into our experience. This can transform our understanding of what we may be facing.

It's not easy, but I encourage you to remain open to interruption. It may bring opportunities to serve, or it may bring a blessing that is needed.

Nurture a willingness to let God change your plans.

Consider how the walls you put up to protect yourself may also keep others out. How can you let others in?

Are you going through something difficult/isolating? Where might you seek community with others who have experienced something similar?

Visit the lonely; develop relationships that go beyond holiday visits.

Consider volunteer work with people who may be facing isolating or lonely experiences such as in hospice, NICU, the unhoused, and the local jail.

Consider who in your life might feel judged or lonely. How might you reach out to them and provide space to "just be."

Name the joy that comes from embracing God's activity.

Can you imagine, what would it look like if the church, if this church became more of a place where everyone could find meaningful relationships and community?

For true companionships to be nurtured and developed?

What would it take to get us all there? What would it take to make room for all the complexities peoples' lives entail?

It would require not yielding to fear.

“Crazy ideas” might be tested and trusted more often, recognizing that they might be possibilities from God.

As we continue to press into Advent, maybe the question before us is not simply whether we will make room for Christ, but whether we will make room for one another.

But then I think...that's kind of the same thing. One requires the other.

God chose to bring hope into the world not in isolation, but through relationship—through Mary and Elizabeth finding refuge, strength and joy together.

In a season when loneliness can feel heavier and the darkness longer, we are invited to resist withdrawal and open our lives to connection.

We are encouraged to make room for Advent.

Making room may look like reaching out, listening without fixing, welcoming without judgment, making pumpkin pie for your pastor. Just an idea...

No, pie and cookies to enrich fellowship time and allowing ourselves to be known.

Imagine the witness of a church that becomes a true sanctuary—where people can carry both their hope and their pain, and trust they will not carry it alone.

May we make room for God's surprising work by making room for one another, and in doing so, prepare a place where Christ's hope can truly dwell and GROW among us. Amen.

As we move into a Time of Reflection consider one of these questions:

Where in your life might God be inviting you this Advent to make more room—for connection, vulnerability, or relationship—rather than trying to carry things alone?

Or who around you may be experiencing isolation, grief, or quiet shame, and how might you offer them the kind of presence and sanctuary that Elizabeth and Mary offered one another?