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As much fun as it is to be a part of a vibrant and vital conversation, there is also something intriguing and exciting about being a third party to the conversation. I don't really mean being an eavesdropper, necessarily, but I mean just being present when that vital conversation is happening, because you see something powerful happen when two people connect. Not only can you sometimes hear it in their voice, but you can see it even in their posture. Perhaps they sit with an open posture, their arms are not crossed, but their arms extended. And perhaps they're leaning in to the conversation very real and physically. And you can see it when that is happening in a conversation, even if you're just watching on the sidelines. And those kinds of conversations happen when people for one reason or another have a connection. Maybe it's when two lawyers get together and they're not in the courtroom. Or maybe it's when two schoolteachers who teach the same subject or age group get together to talk. Or maybe it's when the Disciples clergy cluster gets together. There is just that special kind of conversation that happens. It's when you know that you "get" each other, so to speak.

And I couldn't help but wonder, as I was overhearing the conversations that were happening between Elizabeth and Mary, if they just "get" each other, if there is a communication that they can have, without even saying a word, that they just sort of understand each other. And on the face of it, Mary and Elizabeth might seem that they could not be more different, even though in this moment they have this mystic union and communion, if you will. Elizabeth, by tradition, is about 60 years old. She was thought to be barren for all of these years. She is probably the much talked about wife of Zachariah. By tradition, because of Elizabeth's barrenness, Zachariah could have dismissed her in a divorce because Elizabeth was not up to the task of marriage, or womanhood, or union. That was just the facts of the tradition. But Zachariah, being a holy and a righteous and an understanding husband, stayed in marriage with Elizabeth. She served the role as the wife of a priest doing all of those things that we might even think of modern pastors' wives doing sometimes. But then there's Mary, and Mary is with child two, but rather than being about 60, Mary is probably as young as 12 or 14. And Mary unfortunately, is not in a long-term married relationship. Mary, at this point, is only engaged or espoused to her much older husband. And so not only would Mary's pregnancy be as improbable as Elizabeth's, it would be improbable for another reason, and it would be a scandal. So you have these two women who by tradition are cousins who are thrown together in improbable pregnancy narratives.

While they couldn't appear to be more different on the surface, underneath, there is a human and a real connection.

I can't help but wonder if both parties have something that the other needs. That is, maybe Elizabeth is absolutely terrified at the thought of being pregnant at this advanced age. In fact, -early in the text, it says that Elizabeth stayed in seclusion for five months. That was a highly uncommon thing, at the time. Maybe Elizabeth was afraid that she would lose that child and miscarry. Because if you tell the world that you are pregnant, and then you miscarry, maybe yet again, you feel that sense of sadness, and maybe even shame publicly. And so maybe there is this part of Elizabeth, who knows that she needs someone who maybe can understand. And it says that Mary went to see Elizabeth, but by tradition, Mary and Elizabeth live 80 miles apart. This would not be like going across town to see that neighbor that you love, or even getting in the car to make your Christmas trek, somewhere on the other side of the state, or two states over. This would be 80 miles on foot or possibly by donkey, but it would not have been a quick or an easy journey. Maybe Mary isn't just visiting. Maybe Mary is in hiding.

Maybe Mary has gone to be with Elizabeth because of her shame that she is not yet ready to reveal, her shame that we know will be her glory. But Mary is very present in this moment. You know, you can tell somebody, "Oh, this will be a good thing for you. This will be a good transition in your life." But when you're going through that good thing, and you're going through that good transition in your life, that feels painful, that feels shocking, that feels disruptive, it is sometimes hard to believe it's a good thing. And maybe what Mary and Elizabeth are doing is simply wondering what the future will hold. Even if they have come to the realization, even if they have come to understand that they are pregnant, there is still that moment when sometimes mothers hold their belly and wonder what it will really be like. Because as much as you have dreamed, as much as you have envisioned, as much as you have pondered, what we know is until the new thing happens, you don't really know. All you can do is wonder and envision and consider. Because what we know is even when someone says that new job, that new move, it's going to be wonderful, we don't know what the new job, we don't know what the new move means until we actually inhabit it.

And sometimes when the new thing is about to break forth, even though we've been told it will be wonderful, the most common experience is fear. And sometimes, we need to be braced up in our fear, even if good things are on the way. I remember vividly when my brother Joe's first child was about to be born. My brother Joe called at about 11pm. No one ever calls my parents that late. And my brother said in a panicked voice, "It isn't true, is it?" And my mom kind of groggily said, "What?" Joe replied, "That your child is just like you are. I can't handle a child that was like me, I know what I was like, when I was a child." And my, my mother in the groggy state sort of talked Joe off the ledge: "It's going to be fine, Joe, they just say that. It's just an old saying, everything will be fine." But after my mom got off the phone, she did feel some better that Joe at least had a recognition that he had not been the easiest child in the world. But I know that my brother Joe isn't the only one of that has happened to, that even though the nursery is prepared, even though maybe the clothing has been knit., and even if you know the sex of the child, there is that moment right before the birth when you go, "Oh, my goodness. Can I really do this? Am I really up to the task? Mate, maybe someone else, but I can't do it. I don't have the ability." And even if it hasn't been with a child, just before that big thing breaks forth, we become very timid. And maybe Mary needed to hear Elizabeth say, "You are blessed. You can get through this

temerity because you are blessed. You can get through this temerity because God is with you, because God has chosen you for just this moment, just this time, and just this place.”

Because I think that's how this works. Because when we are in a world of fear, when even though we are told that what is going to happen is going to be good for us, sometimes the only thing that gets us through is God--reaffirming us and placing us on solid ground. You see, that is the real beauty of Advent. It's not just something that church folk made up a long time ago to put off Christmas' coming. Advent gives us that space to consider and to wonder what it will be like, to ask ourselves, in heart and in mind, if we are really ready for this new thing, if we are ready not only for God to do a new thing, but if we are ready to do a new thing, if we are ready to inhabit that new place, if we are ready to live our lives in new and dynamic ways, if we are ready to open our arms and greet God, if we are ready to embrace what could be. Because what we know is we cannot embrace the new if we have closed fist and arms close to chest. The only way that we can embrace God, the only way we can embrace God's vision is when we open ourselves up. And sometimes we have to ask ourselves if we are ready to do just that. And we know something else about sacred and holy conversation. At some times, it needs to take as long as it needs to take. Because conversations that are had too quickly, sometimes are not heard, or sometimes are heard incompletely, or perhaps the intonation is off just a bit.

Think about the text conversation that you got that you read in entirely the wrong way because you read it in your mind, or the conversation that you read on email, where you decided what the tone was--different than you had in your mind's ear, if you will. One of the things that I still struggle with, personally, is why we are so time sensitive with God. You know, we have this sense of how we come to God. I do these devotions in the morning, for this amount of time. I pray at this time for this amount of time. I like my worship style like this. Or I like my worship at about this length. What would it look like as we encounter not only Advent or the Christmases that are to come? If we just pledged ourselves to sitting with God and letting God take as long as God needs to take with us. knowing that great works are not formed overnight, or in a moment, or in a day. And that deep and meaningful and transformative soul work probably takes time. Like the way a seed germinates in the soil, and then slowly and with effort pushes to the top. And you just see those green shoots after months and months of work. And sometimes those shoots come from seeds that are annuals, and they only come forth in their season and in their time. What would it look like if we gave ourselves to God's time? Knowing that God has all the time that God needs with us.

And we, too, as a congregation, can enter that sacred and holy conversation, asking God what do you have envisioned for us? What will it be like when your new thing in your transformation breaks forth? And are we willing to go with your vision of transformation? Because sometimes, God, your vision of transformation doesn't look like ours. We know that in a moment, when we listen to the words of the Magnificat. Everything in that order is turned upside down from the classic expectations of the day. The rich and the well filled and the haughty are cast down and the lowly and the last are lifted up in a whole new order.

Perhaps the question of Advent that hangs in the air and the question for people of Emmanuel, God With Us, is can we give ourselves to God's new order, even if it looks nothing like the former? And be at

peace with that and have those holy conversations that move us into a new understanding and a new being? Amen