

Community Church of Issaquah

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Two Wonderful but Different Mothers

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More than likely, as today's scripture passages were read, you might have asked yourself, "Has the pastor gotten his calendar confused and doesn't realize that it's not Christmas time?" That would be a valid thought as we heard again the stories of Elizabeth and Mary read for us. I am well aware of the fact that this is the month of May, and especially Mother's Day, which is the very reason I chose to share my thoughts about these two women who have a very significant role in the history of our faith.

The Bible is full of mothers who are aspiring and amazing, but as I sat pondering what mother or mothers have inspired me, Elizabeth and Mary came to mind very quickly. Their stories are quite different, yet they have much in common in the role of motherhood. What are some of their differences? Let me share:

- The most notable difference surely must be their age. Elizabeth is an older woman well past the age of conception; Mary is a teenager, probably about 14 years old.
- Elizabeth is married to a high priest named Zechariah; Mary is not married at all but would be married to a common carpenter after the birth of her baby.
- Elizabeth's instructions from the angel about how to raise her son are very specific; Mary is not told how to be a parent.
- Elizabeth likely lived in a very nice residence related to her husband's priesthood; Mary lived among the

working poor, which was the plan for the coming of the Savior.

There are other differences, certainly, but there are also common factors of these two incredible women.

- First, Elizabeth and Mary were likely related, probably as cousins.
- Elizabeth deeply wanted to be a mother and had prayed for that, yet when she did become pregnant, she went into seclusion for five months; Mary is a virgin and remained silent for fear of societal negative response. Both did not know how to tell others what had happened to them.
- The birth of each child was foretold by an angel of the Lord. First Gabriel to Zechariah to share about the pregnancy of Elizabeth, and then the angel Gabriel again appeared to Mary to tell her she had been chosen to bear the son of God.
- Both Elizabeth and Mary had strong words of praise to God for their future sons. Elizabeth said, “In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.” Mary spoke more, and said, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”
- Each mother was given clear instruction about what to name her child – John and Jesus.

There are more commonalities and differences between these two women, but each holds a very important role in our Christian history and faith. Can you imagine what life was like for Elizabeth, the wife of a Jewish priest? Her role was to be not only a faithful wife, but also a beloved mother. Jewish tradition made it important for a woman to give birth, not just to a child, but to a son. That concept

went all the way back to Eve and her two sons and Sarah, Abraham's wife, and their son Isaac. But Elizabeth thought herself to be infertile and unable to bear children. That caused her to be in an awkward place in being unable to provide a son to follow her husband in the priesthood. She was likely the subject of humiliation and shame.

The angel Gabriel who came to foretell the birth of John did not come to Elizabeth, but to Zechariah. The encounter with Gabriel was so powerful that Zechariah lost his voice and could not speak until after their baby was born. Little is known about Elizabeth after she became pregnant and before the birth of her son. Somehow, she was told that her son would be named John, which again, broke with Jewish tradition. A Jewish mother did not name her child, that was the task of the father. Sons usually were given the name of a relative, but the name John was not a family name.

After Elizabeth gave birth to the baby, it was the custom to wait until the 8th day after birth to name a child. This was to make sure that the child continued to live. So there on the 8th day, when asked, Elizabeth answered the curious about what the child would be named with one word – John. Those with her said that was not proper and could not be. So, when they turned to Zechariah to ask him, he requested a tablet to write since he could not speak, but miracle of miracles, his voice returned and he spoke clearly that his son would be named John, verifying what Elizabeth had said.

So much is not known about the remainder of her life, but we know from Biblical history that instructions given about how John would be raised were followed closely. One

curious instruction was that John could never drink any fermented beverage, meaning wine. Imagine a mother's hard job of forcing your son to follow the rules of the angel when all other sons were free to partake. Elizabeth isn't mentioned again in the scriptures, but as we learn more and more about the life of John the Baptizer, it is evident that she was an outstanding mother. Her son John was sent to dwell in the desert, became the forebearer of Jesus Christ, baptized Jesus, and was beheaded for his stance of faith and his faithful following the guidance of his mother. Do you think she was an amazing mother? Sadly, she may not have lived long enough to see her son preparing for the promised savior, but hopefully, she did not see his death,

A very different picture is painted of Mary, the mother of Jesus. In another Jewish tradition, once girls entered puberty, usually as young teenagers, their family would arrange a marriage with the hope that their daughter would be the bearer of sons. Mary, probably a 14-year-old was promised to wed a local carpenter, Joseph. Because men waited until their 30's, the future for both Mary and Joseph seemed to be set in place. But the world turned upside down when Gabriel, the angel, came to talk to Mary. Imagine her surprise when he told her that she would become pregnant as a virgin and would become the mother to the Son of God.

There is difficulty in explaining all the circumstances of the lives of a chosen couple. After the angel came to tell Joseph what to do, he made the person decision to stay as the promised husband of Mary, even though he had nothing to do with the pregnancy. We all know the portion of their story that happened in Bethlehem when Mary delivered her son and they named his Jesus as they were

instructed. Mary appears in scripture only a few more times in stories like Jesus' running away at the age of 12 so that he could teach in the synagogue, or when she accompanied him to the wedding where water was turned to wine.

I've often wondered how complicated it was for Mary to attempt to raise her divine son in a normal way when he was not a normal child. We are aware that Mary gave birth to other children which surely must have added elements of stress as she strove to follow the angel Gabriel's directions about this child of God. It is difficult for me at times to imagine what Mary's life would be like – giving up her youth to become an adult, the pressure of fearing she might not be doing everything God wanted her to do, and the struggle of raising a child after you've had to flee your native home for fear of your son being killed, and so much more.

The one message of inspiration, however, for all of us is simply that every mother truly hopes that she will always seek to give her child or children her best guidance. Each of us who sits here today must reflect on our own mother. Yes, mothers are not perfect, but neither are their children. But it is the outcome of how the child reaches a level of pride for their mother. It warms my heart to think of how Elizabeth must have found such pride in her son John and how proud Mary was of her son Jesus. I want to thank them for their inspiration and hope that my own mother might in her reflection have a sense of pride in her son of who she would explain as “challenging, not bad.”