THEME: Journey to Bethlehem
“Mary’s Visit to Elizabeth”
Sermon preached by Jeff Huber – based on a sermon series by Adam Hamilton
December 15-16, 2012 at First United Methodist Church - Durango

Luke 1: 39-56

A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. At the sound of Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, “God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.”

VIDEO Mary Visits Elizabeth Sermon Starter
SLIDE Mary’s Visit to Elizabeth

Please take out of your bulletin your Message Notes and your Meditation Moments. You also will find a map in your bulletin and I would invite you to take that out as well. There is a place there for you to take down some notes today and I hope you will learn a few things about the Christmas story that you didn't know before. I pray each week that God would somehow speak through the Scripture and the story and through the message and that the Holy Spirit would touch your heart so you could hear God's word for you today. I hope you will write those things down that you feel that God is speaking to you as we gather for worship. You also will find some daily Scripture readings for the rest of this week that tie back into today's message. You can read those on your own this week and reflect upon them deeper in the days ahead and I hope you will take the time to do that.

Today we continue in our series of sermons on the Journey to Bethlehem in which we have been retracing the Christmas story from its starting point in Nazareth. Our aim has been to look at this story from a fresh perspective through archaeology, history, geography and theology to see what we might have missed in the Christmas story that most of us know so well, even if we are not Christians. Each week we are trying to answer three questions. What does this part of the Christmas story tell us about the nature and character of God? What does this
part of the Christmas story tell us about the infant Jesus whose birth we are
going to celebrate on Christmas day? What does this story tell me about myself,
about who I am and who I am supposed to be?

Let me remind you of where we have been in this story so far. In the first
weekend of this sermon series we started with Mary hearing the good news,
although she may not of been so sure it was good news at first, from the
messenger Gabriel that she was going to have a baby. Even though she wasn't yet
married and her fiancé would not be the biological father of the child, the Holy
Spirit would supernaturally allow her to have a child. That child will be called
Jesus and he would be the Son of the Most High God, the long awaited messianic
King. At the end of that announcement she simply says, "I am the Lord's servant,
may be with me according to your word."

We heard all of that from Luke's gospel and from there we moved the next
week to Matthew's gospel and his account of this story which begins with Joseph
of Bethlehem. While Mary was from Nazareth, Joseph was from Bethlehem and
we heard about how he received the good news that Mary was going to have a
child. We learned that the Holy Spirit spoke to him in a dream through the Angel
and we talked about how Joseph was a quiet servant who didn't seek any praise
or adulation, but instead was willing to be the earthly father of this child that
Mary would have from the Holy Spirit.

Today we are going to turn to the next step in Mary's story. We learned a
few weeks ago that Mary was probably around 14 years old when she learned
that she was going to have a baby. She knows that the father is not Joseph and
that means that when people find out, it is possible that they might choose to put
her to death. Deuteronomy 22 says that if a young woman is found to be
pregnant by someone other than her husband, she could be put to death. There is
a very real fear which is present for Mary and she most likely is terrified. She most
likely is not telling everyone the good news that she is going to have a baby,
instead she is probably afraid to tell anybody.

Even if she is shown mercy by her community, the likely reality is that
Joseph will not want to marry her which means that she would be a 14-year-old
girl who will raise a child on her own. That is terrifying in and of itself, especially in
the first century when she would be shunned by society and most likely receive
no assistance from anyone.
After Mary discovers that she is pregnant, she doesn't go and tell her parents or anybody else in her community. Instead, we heard in the Scripture that we just read that Mary hurried to a town in Judea in the Hill country where she went to the house of Zechariah and her cousin Elizabeth. We are going to look in just a moment and why she may have chosen this house to go to, but right now I would like to share with you some geography about what this journey would've meant for Mary. We tend to think that Mary may have told her parents that she was going to see her cousin and that she would be back in a little while, but that is not exactly how it worked. Understanding the geography in this story will help us better understand the urgency that Mary must've felt in those days and moments leading up to her decision to go to see Elizabeth.

SLIDE    Palestine at time of Jesus (Map picture)

Please pull out of your bulletin the map of the holy land. In case you haven't been with us the last couple of weeks, let me give you an orientation again. The Mediterranean Sea is off to the left and the Sea of Galilee is up on the top portion of the map. The Jordan River runs out of the Sea of Galilee and flows into the Dead Sea at the bottom of your map. We have learned that the holy land can be divided into three sections. The top is the northern area which is known as the Galilee. The central area today is mostly the West Bank but in the day of Jesus was known as Samaria. The bottom portion of your map which contains Jerusalem and Bethlehem was known as Judea.

Mary was from the town of Nazareth at the top of your map, just to the left of the Sea of Galilee. Nazareth, as we learned two weeks ago, was the town of nobodies and wasn't even on any first century maps. Joseph is from the town of Bethlehem down in the lower portion of Judah and Mary's cousin Elizabeth is from the town of Ein Karam.

SLIDE    Palestine Zoomed in (Bethlehem area-from last week)

Notice where the town in which Elizabeth lives is located on the map. It is not far from Bethlehem and it seems plausible that in addition to telling Elizabeth she also is going to visit Joseph in Bethlehem and tell him as well that she is pregnant. It is almost implied in the text when it tells you where Mary is going in order to visit Elizabeth, that she is going to tell Joseph as well is Elizabeth that she is going to have a child.
We learned last week that is about 10 days walk from Nazareth to Bethlehem and to Ein Karam is about nine days walk from Nazareth. Mary would've traveled through the Valley of Jezreel and over two mountain ranges in order to reach her destination from Nazareth. Once again, that distance is about what it would take to get from here to South Fork, including these two mountain ranges which adds up to nine days walking. This was no small task for Mary to take this nine day journey. She would have found a caravan to go with because there are thieves and there were Samaritans between her and Judea which made it a dangerous journey as well. You could drive from Los Angeles to New York and back and that would be a nine-day journey in the car today. This was a serious journey that Mary was undertaking in order to see her cousin Elizabeth.

**VIDEO  ** Journey to Elizabeth’s House (no audio)

I thought you might like to see some pictures of what the last part of Mary’s journey would have looked like. A day before she arrives in Ein Karam 14-year-old Mary would be passing over the mountains. She passes through this Valley and up the mountain on which this picture was taken. There is an ancient road that goes through a grove of olive trees and ends at the church of St. John the Baptist. Elizabeth would have John the Baptist at the same time that Mary would have Jesus and it is believed that this church is built on top of the ruins of Elizabeth and Zachariah’s house. There is a staircase that goes down the left-hand side of the altar that you see in this church and you would arrive in a grotto. You can see a depiction of John the Baptist baptizing Jesus and in this grotto is believed that John the Baptist was born because it is the remains of the house of Elizabeth and Zachariah.

Was John the Baptist born exactly in this place? Nobody really knows, but he probably was born somewhere on this mountain side. It is at least where the church remembers that this event took place that was such a pivotal part of the Christmas story.

**SLIDE  ** Why did Mary take this journey?

Why would Mary traveled for 9 days without saying a word to anybody that she was pregnant just to get to her cousin Elizabeth’s home. We are not positive if Elizabeth is actually Mary's cousin because the word used to describe her simply means family or kin. We know that she was related in some way to Mary.
Remember that Mary is terrified and anxious and frightened. She is confused. She wants to be faithful to God but she doesn't know what is going to happen next. She wonders if anybody will believe her when she tells them her story. Let's remember that in Luke chapter 1, before Mary finds out that she is pregnant, Elizabeth has found out that she is pregnant as well. Elizabeth is postmenopausal meaning she is in her late 50s or early 60s. She has prayed to have a baby her entire life. She is married to a priest named Zachariah and they have been unable to have children, like so many other biblical couples that we read about. Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament were in the same position and in some ways Elizabeth and Zachariah are meant to mirror them.

One day Zachariah is in the Temple doing his duty as a priest when he has a vision of the messenger of God who says to him, "Elizabeth is going to have a child. God has heard your prayers."

Zachariah says, "It's a little too late for that God! That ship has already sailed. We're not having babies in our house anymore. We’re not able to do that."

The messenger then says, "Because you didn't believe me, you'll be silent for the next nine months of this pregnancy and you won't be able to speak. You will see that what I have told you will happen and you and your wife will bear a son. You will name him John and he will go before the Messiah to announce that he is coming."

This is a miraculous pregnancy but it is not exactly like Mary. Mary conceived without a husband but Zachariah and Elizabeth conceive in the ordinary way. She was just past childbearing years and not able to conceive, at least he didn't think so.

When Mary is told by Gabriel that she is with child and going to have a baby he also says to her, "And, your cousin Elizabeth is expecting a child in her old age." Mary knows that she is scared and she doesn't think anybody is going to believe her. She doesn't know how to tell anybody and she recognizes that she needs help. She is confused. Who will understand and possibly believe her? The only human being she could think of is her older cousin Elizabeth because she is also going through her own unbelievable pregnancy.

Mary then takes this nine day journey which has some measure of risk because she is desperate to find somebody who can understand and help her make sense of what is taking place. Can you feel what drives Mary to make this
journey and to visit her cousin Elizabeth, through the Hill country of Judea into Ein Karam?

She arrives and when she sees her cousin and says, "Elizabeth, it is me Mary." We then read these words.

**SLIDE** *At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.*

Elizabeth is about six months pregnant at this point and she feels her child jump. In the Old Testament it was only the prophets who were filled with the Holy Spirit and maybe occasionally the King. In this particular text we learn that Elizabeth is herself a prophet.

**SLIDE** *Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, “God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.”*

Those of you who have Catholic roots will recognize these words about Mary. John the Baptist leaped for joy when in the womb he hears the sound of Mary's voice.

When you are carrying a burden and you don't tell anybody about it, do you know how that starts to feel heavy? Mary has been carrying this burden for nine days and she travels to see her cousin Elizabeth. She no doubt has become more and more scared as she wonders about her future. She has made her way in silence to Elizabeth's house for this nine day journey. She no doubt is terrified and has said nothing to anyone. Finally, as she reaches Elizabeth, she is told, "Child, you don’t have to be afraid. You've been blessed. Don't you see it! You have been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah! It's going to be okay and somehow God is going to make sure that people believe your story. I believe your story and it is going to be awesome! We will go through it together. You are so blessed the child within your womb is blessed."

It is here, for the first time, Mary opens her mouth and she cries out joy.

**SLIDE** *"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."*
She breaks into song, singing the Magnificat which we will look at in a few moments. What she needed was someone who could help her have perspective on what she was facing. She needed someone who would listen and believe in her. She needed someone who would encourage her.

I what you notice that Elizabeth uses the word "blessed" three times in this short passage of Scripture. She says, "You are blessed among all women, and your child is blessed. Don't you see Mary that you really are blessed?"

SLIDE What does it mean to be blessed?

This begs a question. What does that mean to be blessed? We think that being blessed is about having money or prestige or power. If we have a big house and a big TV and our kids are perfect then we are blessed. I want you notice that Mary wasn’t blessed like that at all.

In fact, you will find that in the Scriptures God's blessings don't often feel like blessings in the moment that you received them. They actually sometimes feel like curses. You say something and it is terrifying and frightening and you can't see until afterwards, looking back on it, what a blessing that it was. We often call those, "blessings in disguise." Mary was seeing the negative possibilities and the frightening things because of her circumstances. It is Elizabeth who helps her see that it is a blessing.

William Barclay is a great New Testament commentator and he talks about the, "paradox of blessedness," that we find in the Scriptures. When we find blessings in the Scriptures they often don't feel like blessings. They seem like challenges and adversity. This is what he says.

SLIDE "The piercing truth is that God does not choose a person for ease and comfort and selfless joy, but for a task that will take all that head and heart and hand can bring to it."

God said to Abraham, "You are blessed. Now I want you leave everything that you own behind in the Mesopotamian River Valley. I want you to go to a land that you never been to before. By the way, you have been blessed. Now, go and be a blessing to the nations ."

In Luke's gospel, Jesus says these words in the sermon on the plain. "Blessed are the poor." It is not just the poor in spirit, but the poor who are blessed. "Blessed are those who hunger. Blessed are those who are thirsty."
Blessed are you when people revile you and say bad things about you and hurt you. Blessed are you, because great is your reward in the kingdom of heaven. God is going to use even these hard moments to do something great so you are blessed and you can't see it yet."

Sometimes, when you're facing difficult circumstances, you hold on tight with white knuckles and you say, "God, I trust that you will take this moment of blessedness and bring out something good. I know you're going to bless me." Sometimes, in hard moments I have simply wanted to say, "God, I have had enough blessedness today. Could you please give it to someone else for a while?"

When you pray, "Bless me Lord," you should be careful what you are praying for. It may not be for what you think because it may bring things that are difficult and challenging and tough, but in the midst of them God is going to do something really great. That is part of what we learn in this story about Mary coming to Elizabeth and that is the, "paradox of blessedness."

The other thing that we see in this story is an image of an older woman blessing and mentoring a younger woman and a younger woman bringing blessings to her older mentor. Mary is 14 or 15 in this story and Elizabeth is in her 50s or maybe even 60s. Mary desperately needs an older woman who can give her perspective on her life. The very thing that brings Mary joy is the fact that Elizabeth has enough perspective to say, "Honey, this is not a bad thing. It can be okay." This is a picture of mentoring.

You can see a physical depiction of this when you go to the Church of the Visitation. In Ein Karam there are two churches to visit that have holy and significant meaning. There is the Church of St. John the Baptist but there is an older church which has been around even longer. It is built on top of an ancient cistern, which is what collects water in a community. This is where they would've come to draw water in the city of Ein Karam. It is their life source. The church is built on top of it because the early church believed this is where Mary and Elizabeth would have gone to draw water for their homes. They built a church in this place to remember Mary's visit to Elizabeth. Let's take a look at this church and what it looks like today.

VIDEO Church of the Visitation (no audio)

Here in this church you climb a long set of stairs at the top of which you can see a mosaic of Mary approaching the home of Elizabeth. In the lower level of the
church, people gathered there for worship and there is still a cistern from which you can draw water. On the wall and 70 different languages is Mary's song, "The Magnificat." You see a sculpture at the end of the wall depicting a six-month pregnant Elizabeth mentoring the newly pregnant Mary.

**SLIDE    Elizabeth and Mary (picture)**

Throughout the sanctuary you find pictures and depictions of Elizabeth encouraging Mary. The text tells us that Elizabeth has been in seclusion for five months. She found out she was pregnant and she went into hiding. Why did she do this? She might be afraid that she will miscarry, like she had done several times before. Maybe she's embarrassed, being an older woman and now being pregnant. How do you explain that to your neighbors and friends? We don't really know why, but we do know that she went into seclusion until Mary shows up.

Mary draws her out of that seclusion and back into the world because Mary needs Elizabeth. Mary has been terrified and Elizabeth encourages her and Mary then finds joy. This leads to a question for each one of us as we read this story. We all need an Elizabeth in our lives. We all need an older person who understands and who can guide us and encourage us, and we all need to be doing that for younger person. So let me ask you a question.

**SLIDE    Who is your Elizabeth?**

Who is the Mary that you are investing in and encouraging who is younger than you are? A person who was an Elizabeth for me was a mentor who retired this last year from active ministry, Rev. Harvey Martz. This is a photograph of Harvey at my ordination, along with the youth group I was serving at the time.

**SLIDE    Harvey Martz (photo Jeff will bring.)**

Harvey literally changed my life. He encouraged me and believed in me and mentored me and challenged me and taught me many things about being a pastor and a follower of Jesus. In many ways he was a father figure to me. Harvey was the chair of the Rocky Mountain Conference Board of Ordained Ministry, the group that approves United Methodist pastors when I was finishing seminary. The church I had been serving as a youth pastor had the senior pastor removed for misconduct in my last year of seminary. I was given a Local Pastors license and asked to serve that church and it just about killed me and almost ended my marriage, and I tried to care for a congregation that was grieving the loss of their pastor and felt betrayed by his actions. I decided I no longer wanted to be a
pastor and so I turned in my orders and told him I would not be continuing and becoming ordained as a pastor.

Harvey called me within a few days and told me that I was free to turn in my ordination papers, but he hoped that I would spend some time with him before he did. In the midst of all of the pain and chaos of those days Harvey said something to me that I will never forget and it changed my life. He said, "Jeff, being a pastor is a privilege and not a right. Your senior pastor lost that privilege when he betrayed your trust and the women he took advantage of in the congregation you are serving. I am sorry you experienced that and I will do all in my power to make sure that he won't hurt anyone again as a pastor." You see Harvey was also in charge of dealing with pastors who had betrayed the trust of their congregation and had been removed for misconduct.

Harvey also asked me to come and serve with him in one of our largest Methodist churches that was located in Colorado Springs. Harvey had been pastor of the church and seen it grown from 40 people to over 900 and worship in the 20 years that he served that congregation. I became the youth pastor at Calvary United Methodist Church in 1993 and during the years that we served together Harvey spoke into my life in many ways. He taught me how to lead a growing church and why it was important to reach out beyond the walls of the church. He taught me the importance of tithing and giving to God.

When I became a Senior Pastor he was the first to call and tell me how proud he was of me. He also told me that my friends may not want to hear about my successes as a pastor when things were going well because, "we pastors are little insecure and we get jealous pretty easily." He told me that if I was doing well I should call him. He wanted me to brag to him about all the great things that were happening because he was always my biggest cheerleader. He also asked me to call him when things didn't go well so I would have someone that would listen and care for me when things got tough leading a church. Harvey has been generous with his praise and he has been the first to reach out when things got tough and he would tell me, "You're going to make it through this. You're blessed!"

A mentor can give you perspective on what is happening in life and can speak truth in your life when you need to hear it. So let me ask you again. Who is your Elizabeth?
Now let me ask you another question.

SLIDE For whom are you an Elizabeth?

We have several members in our church who are over 50 who are recovering alcoholics. They have been through 12 step programs and they have seen their lives turn and go in a new direction after they became sober. Several of them have come to me and said, "If ever you come across a young person who is struggling with alcohol please don’t hesitate to give them my name and connect me to them. I would be happy to call them and encourage them and tell them that they can make it through this. I would go pick them up and bring them to my AA meeting and be a partner for them." These kinds of connections have happened several times in the past few years here at First United Methodist Church and I have seen lives be transformed as people take seriously the need to mentor and be mentored.

I have realized that over the course of the next 20 years of my life I will not spend near as much time with the people who have been an Elizabeth for me, but instead I will need to be Elizabeth for others. I try really hard to meet the new pastors coming into our annual conference who are younger and encourage them, especially in a time when it is becoming more and more difficult to be a pastor. I try to meet with some of our younger people in our congregation who are interested in being pastors or in leadership the church. As much as I would like to think that I am blessing them I find myself blessed as I receive their energy and enthusiasm for ministry and as they teach me new things about how the world works that I sometimes miss because I am older.

We try and make sure that in each of our leadership team in the church we have people who are under 35 as well is people who are over 55 and people who are in between. While those who are older pass on their wisdom to the younger generation we also gain fresh insights and ideas from those who are younger. Together, something amazing happens, which is part of what we see in the Elizabeth and Mary story. It’s powerful and it is a picture of what we need as human beings. It is where we find wisdom and how we find joy and discover blessings.

One last point to consider in this story today is what we discover from Mary’s song about the character of God and the Christ child, whose birth we celebrate this month. Mary finds her joy and as she does that she breaks out in
song. I want you to hear Mary's Magnificat as it is seen on the wall of the Church of Visitation that we just saw, and that particular English translation among the 70 other translations that you find on the wall. This is what we find that Mary says.

**VIDEO**  Mary’s Magnificat

*My soul magnifies the Lord. My spirit rejoices in God my Savior, because He has regarded the lowliness of his handmaid. For behold, henceforth, all generations shall call me blessed, because He who is mighty has done great things for me, and Holy is His name, and for generation upon generation His mercy is to those who fear him. He has shown might with his arm. He has scattered the proud and the conceit of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones. He has exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has given help to Israel, his servant, mindful of his mercy, even as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his posterity forever.*

**SLIDE**  Mary visits Elizabeth (picture)

This song picks up the theme we have seen all three weeks of the season of advent. In the first week we learned that Mary was a nobody from the town of nobodies that didn't even merit having the town's name on a map in the first century. Last week we learned that Joseph, who God chose to be the earthly father of Jesus, was a carpenter. He wasn't a master carpenter or in charge of carpenters, but rather a simple man with a simple profession. We are going to learn that on Christmas Eve God called the night shift shepherds, the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder in the first century, to be the first ones to celebrate the birth of the Christ child. Here, in Mary's song, she sings what she has experienced—that God humbles the proud and the arrogant and he lifts up the lowly and the Meek.

There is a reversal of fortunes that is found in the Gospels and is echoed in the stories of the birth of Christ. Those who exalt themselves and lift themselves up will find themselves crashing down to earth and those who are humbling themselves will be lifted up. We see it throughout the teachings of Jesus where he says that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. Jesus teaches his disciples that if you really want to be great then you will be a servant of others. Jesus tells his earliest followers that if you are invited to a wedding banquet, take the lowest seat at the table and don't assume you should sit at the head of the table, and
then maybe the master of the banquet will call you and ask you to sit at the head table. But if you assume that you should be sitting at the head of the table it may be that the master asks you to give up your seat and go sit at the lowest table at the wedding banquet.

The Scriptures teach us, "Humbling thyself in the side of the Lord and God will lift you up." We find this picture of God who has a heart for the underdog. God is concerned about the people who were made to feel small and made to feel like they are nobodies and God will lift them up. This is the character of the God who is proclaimed in the Scriptures, and the character of his son Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ comes in the very form of God but considers being seen as a God not something to be grasped or attained, so instead he humbled himself in the form of a servant as Paul reminds us in Philippians 2. Jesus takes upon himself the cross to suffer for the brokenness and pride of the world. This is the picture that we have of God and his son in this passage of Scripture before us today.

There is one line in this passage that has always troubled me because I grew up in a community that was pretty wealthy and now I live in a community that is fairly affluent and extremely affluent if you look at us in Durango compared to the world's standards. I read this passage this time of year and I wonder what this means for me and what it means for us who live in the community where we have not only abundant but sometimes overwhelming resources. Mary sings these words.

\[\text{SLIDE } \text{He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.}\]

I like the first part of that, where God sent the hungry away full. That is exactly what I'm counting on God to do. But what does it mean if he sent the rich away empty, when we are the rich? I have been to Africa in the last two years and I have been able to serve a mission teams have gone to Mexico City after an earthquake and to several other parts the world and I can tell you firsthand that even those of you who were on the lower socioeconomic scale in our congregation are rich compared to the people who live in those places. It's hard for us to recognize when we are in the middle of this place that we are in the top 3% of people in the world in terms of wealth if we live in Durango.

I don't want to be sent away empty at the end. I have a nice house and I drive a nice car all things considered. I have a flat screen TV and a laptop
computer and an iPad and an iPod. I get to eat out whenever I want to. What does Mary's song mean for me?

As I have wrestled with this passage I think it is an invitation. If I am not going to be sent away empty at the end, in the last day, then it will be because I chose to work with God to fulfill the first part of that prophecy so that those who are hungry go away full. If I look at the blessings that I have my life and I recognize that I am blessed to be a blessing then I can ask, "How can I be a part of God's kingdom which seeks to send the hungry away full? How can I share my resources so that I am blessing others? How can I encourage and lift up others who feel downtrodden and like they are nobodies?"

When I can do those things than I have the joy of being used by God to do something great, and I discover what my blessings are for and I find joy. There is one passage of Scripture where Jesus speaks and it is not found in any of the Gospels. It is found later in the New Testament. You have heard this verse even though you might not have known that it was from Jesus. Paul quotes Jesus in the book of Acts as he is talking about his possession and how we are to view them when he says this.

**SLIDE**

"It is more blessed to give than to receive."

There is joy in that truth given to us by this child whose birth we celebrate this month. Remember that Jesus tells this parable about the last judgment where he says, "I was hungry and thirsty and naked and sick and you turned your back on me. Therefore, I never knew you." He sent them away empty.

Then he says to the other group, "I was hungry and thirsty and naked and sick, a stranger and in prison, and you welcomed me and you loved me and you fed me and you gave me something to drink and you gave me something to wear. You cared for me. Enter into your rest. Well done my servants."

We decide which part of the kingdom we want to be a part of. We know where God's heart is. We know that God is concerned with people who were made to feel small and who have nothing and who go to sleep at night hungry. I read a story this past month about the new backpack program that we have become a part of the elementary schools. The story was about children who go home from school on Fridays and there is literally nothing in their pantries for the weekend and they have to wait till the next Monday morning to get a meal of any substance when the school. You have committed to bringing food to fill up
backpacks to send home with those kids and I want to remind you that God's heart breaks when his children go hungry. We have a chance to come alongside and say, "God, here are my hands and my blessings. Use me to help the hungry go away full." In the process, we find what we were made for as the people of God and those who follow this child.

It's Christmas and many of us wrestle with the same thing every year. What do we get for people who have everything? How much is "too much" when it comes to giving gifts to our kids and how much is not enough? Is everybody getting the same amount and will everybody be treated equally in our family? You run through all of these options in your head as you try to figure out what to get people for Christmas, most of whom can go out and get whatever they want. I don't want to be a Scrooge because part of the fun of Christmas is getting gifts for people that we love and trying to bless them. I am not saying don't do that.

What I am asking is for us to remember what St. Nicholas was doing when he began this tradition of giving gifts. Christians didn't always give gifts at Christmas. It was in the fourth century when the Bishop of Myra began giving away gifts. He was a man of wealth because his parents had left him an inheritance and when he began to do Christmas, he was looking for the children of the poor who had nothing and he began to give them gifts in secret. This is how the tradition of giving gifts at Christmas began. There was joy in that for him and for the children and for that community. There was so much joy that others began to become a part of that tradition and it is now morphed into what we experience today in America as the time that we determine whether we've had a good economic year or not.

This is why this church has a history of giving away our entire Christmas offering. On Christmas Eve we challenge you and all of the people who only show up for that service to do something together and in the true spirit of Christmas. We give all of our Christmas offering away and in the past few years you have built a well in Kenya for the orphanage and you have began the building of a dormitory for abused girls in the slum area in Kenya. This year we have two places that our Christmas offering is going to go and rather than tell you about myself I thought it would be good for you see and hear about it from members of our mission team. Check this out.

VIDEO Christmas Offering 2012
This next year we will be part of fishing net girl’s dorm and renovating the Holly House. Some of you are going to do the actual work and what do you think you’re going to feel as a congregation as you step back and take a look at those projects six months from now and you see that they are completed? I think you are going to feel joy.

This is "joy" Sunday during this season of advent and we learned where joy comes from today. Joy comes from having relationships with other people who can help us find perspective in the midst of adversity. Joy comes from remembering that being blessed is often painful and yet in the end, God does something great through it. Joy is found when we remember that God lifts up the lowly and we become a part of what God is doing when we humble ourselves and lift up others. We do these things and we find joy.

Our invitation today is to remember that as we approach Christmas. Find your Elizabeth and find your Mary. Make sure that on the last day you are not sent away empty, but instead you have been a part of helping the hungry go away full. I think that is the meaning of this passage of Scripture before us today. Would you pray with me?

With your heads bowed and your eyes closed, I invite you to pray something simple like this... Lord, help me to invest in the lives of younger people, to mentor them and encourage them...

You might have in mind who your "Elizabeth" already is, somebody who has changed your life, so take a moment to simply say, God, thank you so much for that person who has blessed my life. If you don't have an older person who pours in your life you might pray, God, please help me find the person...

Finally, you might simply pray something like this...God, please help me to be used by you, to bless those who are in need, to encourage and help the hungry go away full...

God, we thank you for this powerful story. We pray that you might help us to, like Elizabeth, mentor and bless younger people, to invest in them and in future generations. Lord, help us to recognize like Mary that we need others who are older and wiser and more seasoned than we are to help give us perspective in life.
God, I pray you would help our congregation to be known for the way that we give and bless others. Help us to be your hands and voice in sending the hungry away full, in Jesus name we pray. Amen.
“Mary’s Visit to Elizabeth”
Theme: The Journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem

Luke 1: 39-45

A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. At the sound of Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, “God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.”

Things I’d like to remember from today’s sermon:

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

Meditation Moments

Monday, December 17 – Read Luke 1:5-25 – Zechariah was one of perhaps 18,000 priests and Levites. To be chosen by lot to burn incense in the Temple was a privilege that might come only once in his lifetime. Like Abraham and Sarah, he and Elizabeth were elderly and childless. But Gabriel was God’s messenger to bring them news of an astounding, unexpected change in their lives.

- In Luke 1:30, God’s messenger said, “Do not be afraid, Mary.” Today we see that months before, he said, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah” (verse 13). In fact, “do not be afraid” is the most common command in the entire Bible. What scares you most right now? This Advent, how do you most need God’s message, “Do not be afraid”?

- Luke’s story was no “once upon a time” tale. It was about real people and places. Does it help you to trust Luke’s story that he gave many names and dates that people in his day could easily have verified? Why or why not?

Tuesday, December 18 – Read Luke 1:1-4 – Like other ancient history writers, Luke began his narrative about Jesus with a formal Greek prologue in which he tells us several important things. He said his writing was the result of careful personal investigation and that his sources were, “those who from the first were eyewitnesses.”

- Ancient historians highly valued eyewitness testimony (see Bauckham, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses). Only one or two people saw many parts of Luke’s Christmas story. Who could have told Luke about Gabriel’s visit to Zechariah or Mary? Christian tradition says Mary lived in Ephesus, where Luke went with Paul. Have you ever thought that Luke might have learned the Christmas story directly from Mary, who lived it?

- Luke addressed his two historical books (Luke and Acts) to “Theophilus.” The title “Most Excellent” usually meant he was highly placed in Roman society. Write an “eyewitness account” of Jesus’ impact on your life. Consider who you could share it with.

Wednesday, December 19 – Read Luke 1:39-56 – When Gabriel told Mary she would bear the Messiah, he vouched for the truth of his words by saying that Elizabeth was also pregnant. Much remains unspoken in this passage. It seems likely that Mary, facing distrust and disapproval in Nazareth, yearned to be with a woman who could understand her experience.

- Mary’s Magnificat (in Latin, the first word of her song in verse 46) was not bland “church talk.” In verses 52-54, this peasant girl in an occupied land praised a God who scatters the proud, brings down rulers and...
feeds the hungry. How does Mary’s song offer you hope and challenge (whether you feel rich or poor, powerful or powerless)?

- Imagine the day-to-day support and understanding these two women gave each other during their three months. Who has blessed you with understanding and love when you really needed it? Is there someone who needs your support this Advent season?

**Thursday, December 20 – Read 1 Samuel 2:1-11** – Long before Elizabeth and Mary, a childless Hebrew woman named Hannah, prayed for a child. When God heard her prayer and gave her a son, she dedicated him to God’s service. He was the great Israelite leader and prophet, Samuel. Then she offered this psalm in honor of God, a poetic prayer much like Mary’s expression of praise when she met Elizabeth.

- Hannah’s song said “those who stumbled are armed with strength... those who were hungry are hungry no more….The Lord...raises the poor from the dust.” God came to earth, and was born not in a palace but in an animal shelter. How can you, as a Christ-follower, more fully live into God’s attitude toward material wealth and poverty?

- 1 Samuel 1 says Hannah’s husband had another wife, Peninah (common in that day). She had children and taunted Hannah, causing her great pain. Do some parts of Hannah’s song carry a tone of triumph over her rival that wasn’t in Mary’s? How do you see the difference between healthy joy in God’s goodness and hurtful gloating?

**Friday, December 21 – Read Luke 1:57-66** – When Elizabeth’s son was born, her neighbors and relatives shared her joy. Her joy was even greater because many believed childlessness was a sign of God’s disapproval. She now felt God had finally lifted the cloud under which she lived. When they named the baby John as the angel had said (Luke 1:13), Zechariah was able to speak again.

- Last week we saw that Joseph gave up the privilege of siring his first-born son to obey God. Zechariah here gave up the privilege of naming his son after himself. John was called not to follow his father as a priest, but instead to challenge that set of religious leaders. How did his father’s submission to God point the way for John’s life mission?

- “All the neighbors were filled with awe...throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things....asking, ‘What then is this child going to be?’” We’d say there was “a lot of buzz” about John’s birth. How did God use human curiosity (even our urge to gossip!) to add impact to John’s later ministry?

**Saturday, December 22 – Read Luke 2:41-52** – Zechariah’s joyous words about his new son pointing to the Messiah were more than just fatherly pride. God’s messenger had said John would “turn many people in Israel back to their God...herald God’s arrival in the style and strength of Elijah ...kindle devout understanding among hardened skeptics...get the people ready for God.” (Luke 1:17, The Message) Now the aged priest sang with hope of “the path of peace” God was opening for all people.

- Once, John the Baptist’s followers said Jesus’ crowds were bigger than his. John humbly said, “You can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him’...He must become greater; I must become less.” (John 3:28, 30) Zechariah praised the “rising sun”—not his own son, but the coming King his son would go before. Has your ego or desire for praise ever gotten in the way of God’s ability to use you? How can you, using “sober judgment” (Romans 12:3), be more like Zechariah and John?

**Family Activity:** Mary and Elizabeth supported and encouraged each other through a very important and challenging time in each of their lives. As a family, discuss who has been supportive and encouraging to you during challenging times in your life. This Advent season, how could you thank those people for sharing God’s love with you? You might bake treats, call them or write/draw a personal note. Consider inviting them for a family meal or a fun outing to express your appreciation. Examine yourselves and ask how you can support and encourage others during this season and always. Thank God for the gift of people who have shared His love with you. Ask God to help you share God’s love with others all year long.