

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today's gospel reading is a bit of a unicorn. After all, there aren't too many places in the Christian Scriptures where women speak. And there's even fewer places where two women have a conversation with one another. Yet, today's reading is one of them.

These two women were at very different places in their lives. Elizabeth was much older, she was married, and she was well past the normal child-bearing age. Mary, on the other hand, was right around puberty, unmarried, and much younger. While we don't know either of these women's real age (after all, it's rude to ask a woman her age), we do know that they're both from different generations. However, they have a commonality—both are pregnant and, perhaps more importantly, both were assaulted by shame.

You see, Elizabeth was a disgrace in her society because she was childless and couldn't fulfill her duty to provide a child. At the other end of the spectrum was Mary. Mary was pregnant and engaged. Her pregnancy dishonored the families who were moving towards the contractual agreement of marriage. And ancient law even permitted her execution by stoning. Both women suffered from shame and were deprived of honor.

And, that's how honor and shame work. Dr. John Plich says both are external controls on human behavior which depend on the opinion of others. Honor is a public claim to worth or value *and* a public acknowledgment of that claim.

Shame is the loss of honor—that is, the loss of the claim of worth, value, and public acknowledgement of that worth and value.<sup>1</sup>

Shame, as Dr. Brene Brown puts it, is the tape that reminds you that you're never good enough.<sup>2</sup> It's the voice in your head that tells you you're too fat or too weak. That you can never hold onto a job or keep a relationship. That you're not a good parent, partner, or person. That you're nothing more than a fraud, a phony, and a fake. But shame is not only individualistic, it's also thrust upon groups of people. Shame is the way queer people are forced into heteronormative boxes. Shame is the way women are treated when maternity leave is billed as a burden. Shame keeps racism thriving. Shame makes disabilities an inconvenience. Shame is what Mary and Elizabeth knew all too well.

But the gift of today's reading is the way Mary and Elizabeth smother shame with empathy. In their interaction, they brought the lies of shame into focus. They took the secrecy, silence, and judgement that promotes the growth of shame<sup>3</sup> and exposed them. You see, when these inter-generational women talked about shame, they dismantled shame. Out in the open, infertility could no longer carry the shame it once did. Exposed, the generational divide could no longer cause strife. Uncovered, the unjust systems murdering a young, pregnant woman could no longer endure. Now, these two women could grasp God's liberation.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195393361/obo-9780195393361-0077.xml>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_listening\\_to\\_shame/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame/transcript?language=en)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_listening\\_to\\_shame/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame/transcript?language=en)

Then, Mary burst into song, and she pointed to the ways God tends to work. That God tends to liberate the oppressed. God tends to expose the shame that the mighty cast on the lowly. God has a habit of bringing justice. God announces that all people are important and loved. You see, Mary's song is not only about what happened in the past or in her life, but she was also revealing how God always works. In some ways, she's ruining Christmas, because she's acknowledging that yes, Christ is present in the baby Jesus, but so too Christ was alive in the past, is breathing new life in us now, and will incarnate into the future. Mary ruins Christmas by reminding us that God takes on human form all the time. Human form in the prophet Micah, human form in Elizabeth, human form in the stranger on the street, and human form in you.

This powerful story of Elizabeth and Mary reminds us how to expose the lies of shame and proclaim God's gift of love. Here at Wicker Park Lutheran, we have the opportunity to put this story into action. Like, through the Advent Project as we work to feed the hungry with dignity. Or, by our work to make a space for all to cast aside the society's shame to live in abundant love. Or, by embodying the character of Elizabeth and Mary by seeking mutual knowing and by looking for those places where inter-generational connection might bloom. It's in those moments where we share in the difficulty of life as a new parent, the struggle of infertility, the heartbreak of losing a loved one, or the frustration of a never-ending pandemic. It's celebrating the joy of baptism, the gift of God's grace freely given, and the ways that in this place the bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, become integrated in our DNA so that we can embody the incarnate Christ to one another.

So, maybe what we're learning today from Mary and Elizabeth is the importance of mutual care in the journey of life. Perhaps, when we see the honor and love God bestows on us then we can honor and love others. Maybe, we, like Mary, can acknowledge that God proclaims that we are favored ones. Then, with the realization that we are loved, favored, and honored by the God who made stars to shine and rain to fall. Then, we are given the opportunity to share God's love, God's honor, and God's favor with all creation.

So, friends, join me as we move from Advent into the joys of Christmas by casting away the false narrative of shame, so that we might bask in the glow of grace, love, and favor. Come to know that you are not alone, and then, respond to that gift by sharing God's love, grace, and favor with all the world. Magnificat! Magnificat! Magnify God's great works! Amen.