# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

 **“Love”**

**Luke 1:39-56**

 **December 11, 2022**

“Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” We know that God loves us because the Bible tells us that God loves us. The spiritual songs and hymns we sing in worship tell us that God loves us. Our parents and Sunday School teachers told us that God loves us. But, how do we *experience* God’s love? What moves us from something believed with our mind to a personal, inner knowledge understood with our heart? What God did that very first Christmas was to take his love and make it personal, hands-on, experiential, in his Son, Jesus Christ. A baby, wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger, *is* the love of God. “For God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son.”

The story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is the story of a young woman who experienced the love of God. This morning we pick up Mary’s story after she has been visited by the angel Gabriel and told that although she is a virgin, she will give birth to a son and he will be called the Son of God. Gabriel also told Mary that her relative Elizabeth, who has not been able to have children and is now well past child-bearing age, is pregnant, for nothing is impossible with God. I invite you to turn with me to 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.” Mary responded, “Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed. For the Mighty One is holy, and he has done great things for me. He shows mercy from generation to generation to all who fear him. His mighty arm has done tremendous things! He has scattered the proud and haughty ones. He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands. He has helped his servant Israel and remembered to be merciful. For he made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children forever.” Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months and then went back to her own home.

It is not difficult to imagine what the message from the angel Gabriel must have meant to Mary. In her culture, virginity was an honored state for a woman, a sign of spiritual and moral faithfulness to God and to the traditions of her people. And, she was engaged to Joseph, a relationship in which sexual infidelity was considered adultery. Her explanation of a divine conception would be hard for people to believe.

God is asking Mary to make an incredible walk of faith. While Mary has accepted the word of the angel as being the will of God, she must have wondered, “Why me? What do I do now? Will those I love believe me, or will they condemn me? Who can I talk to? Where can I go?” She must have felt terribly alone.

So, “A few days later Mary hurried” to see Elizabeth, her cousin who was also unexpectedly pregnant. It was a three-day journey from Mary’s home to Elizabeth’s, three days for Mary to think about all that was happening to her and to wonder what Elizabeth would say. Would Elizabeth believe her amazing story, or would she assume this young relative was making up a fairy-tale to cover her sinful behavior?

Notice how beautifully Luke describes their meeting. Mary enters the house and greets Elizabeth. Immediately Elizabeth exclaims, “God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed.” The same Spirit of God which enabled Mary to conceive Jesus now fills Elizabeth and causes her child, John, to jump for joy. God is bringing Elizabeth and Mary together and giving Mary exactly what she needs: reassurance, support, encouragement, comfort, and hope – in short, the love of God.

Elizabeth is God’s gift of love to Mary. She is God’s way of showing Mary that he understands her difficult situation and desires Mary to know the love of God in the midst of her circumstances. Not just as a matter of belief, but in her heart. God’s love is real, not just because he says so but because he shows it to us in so many ways, and most clearly and specifically he shows it to us in his Son. And we, in turn, being followers of his Son, show it to one another, as Elizabeth did for Mary.

What is Mary’s response to this demonstration of God’s love? She rejoices! She praises God. Her response to the angel Gabriel was obedience, but her response to the love of God is pure joy. “God has taken notice of me,” she exclaims. God has taken notice of her need to be loved, and he has showered his love upon her.

The wonderful truth of Christmas is that God has taken notice of each one of us. He is for us, he favors us, he delights in use, and he loves us. Growing up, one of the ways that I experienced the love of my parents was their taking notice of me. When they would step aside from their busy lives and focus on me, I knew that I was loved.

I had a friend in High School whose parents let him get away with just about anything. He got in trouble at school – there were no consequences. He was caught shoplifting – they didn’t do anything about it. No curfew, no restrictions, no discipline. I thought he had the best parents in the world! One day I told him so. I still remember the expression of hurt on his face, “Yah,” he said, “they let me do whatever I want. They don’t care what I do because they don’t care about me.” They took no notice of their son; he had no experience of being loved by the most important people in his life.

God has taken notice of us. He has taken notice of our need for salvation and, because he loves us, he sent Jesus into the world that we may be saved through him. This season of Advent, let us say with Mary, “God has done great things for us.”