

Micah 5:2-5a

²But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. ³Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; ⁵and he shall be the one of peace.

Luke 1:39-56

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.' ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

46 And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'

56 And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Can You Give Me a Push?

1. I don't know if you have ever had the fun of participating in someone's endeavor to "pop a clutch." This was a lesson you learn when you grow up in the country and you go through times

of economic hardship. My father lost his job when I was around 12 or 13 years old, and we were very conservative in our spending. Food was a priority, but a car battery wasn't, especially if you had a car with a manual transmission. You didn't need a battery with a car with a manual transmission, because as long as you parked on the top of a hill, you could always release the parking brake, coast down the hill, pop the clutch, and voila! You'd be on your way.

2. Well, it didn't work out that way all the time. If your car stalled on you when you were NOT at the top of a hill, you had to somehow get your car rolling at a certain clip, or find someone who would give you a jump – and you made a lot of friends this way; I remember there were more than a few instances where I would be pushing a 2000 pound car with a few friends, and people would spontaneously join in the endeavor to get the car rolling at a fast enough clip to start the car by “popping the clutch.”
3. And there was no better feeling than getting that car started. And it was like a victory celebration for everyone involved. Smiles would go across everyone's faces. High fives would be shared, and there would be well-wishing from all the participants as you drove off into the sunset. There was that sense of victory as the spontaneous team that assembled to get your car started would celebrate together.
4. And there were few worse feelings than being in the middle of nowhere with a stalled car and a dead battery and no one to help give you a push. We feel that way sometimes, that we're stuck and we are nervous and alone and we pray that someone will come along who can help us, and until help comes, we feel despair.
1. I wonder if Mary was ever in despair. She's pregnant with her first child, she's out of wedlock, and her husband-to-be, who she probably doesn't know at all, has expressed some doubt over the whole situation. And though she has been told in a vision that the child she bears belongs to God and will be great someday, things haven't exactly gotten off to a good start. Couldn't God have waited until AFTER she was married instead of setting her up for scandal? And why her? She's not exactly a woman of great means. She has no medical insurance.

And if this is a child of God, what struggles will he face down the road? The angel told Mary that her child would be a king, but is that such a good thing? Ask any historian what the most dangerous job title could be, and that answer would be “king,” because everyone wanted your job, and they would kill you for it. King Saul attempted to kill David to secure that title. King Solomon killed his brother to keep his title. Mary could have predicted that Herod would come after Jesus someday to defend his title. Wouldn't it be easier for Mary if she mothered a *normal* child who wasn't destined to be great?

I should ask that same question to you mothers here; would you rather have a child who was destined for greatness, knowing that his path would lead him into conflict with powerful people, or a child who will grow up like most other children, who will go to school, get a good job, get married, raise a family, and live his entire life in safety, not getting negative attention, not getting in the way of an assassin's bullet? And as a mother, who obviously has great influence on the direction your children take, would you counsel your son to seek the safe road or the road marked with controversy and danger? It's a mixed blessing to bear a child who is destined to

follow God, even if that child is destined for greatness, as Jesus was. This is the future “king” whom Mary is nurturing in her womb.

Just as Mary faced the dilemma of raising Jesus to pursue his destiny, we Christians face the dilemma of following the path that God wishes us to follow. Because we could take an easier path, the path of comfort, of security of low-risk, or the higher path of righteousness, of risk and vulnerability, in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, the stranger, the disenfranchised, the path that may lead us into direct conflict with those in power. That’s the path that Jesus took, and it’s the path we are called to follow. Because it’s the other path, the path that *looks* easy that’s actually the path of greatest risk, because by taking a path of comfort and security and indifference we stand the risk of losing our very souls. To refuse to follow Jesus leads us to experience poverty of spirit and a separation from God that makes us feel desperate and isolated. We may find some consolation through friends and family, but we can’t avoid forever the gnawing guilt for not doing what we can to serve the needs of the lowly.

Nonetheless, the dilemma exists and always has existed: there have always been those who have chosen the road that Jesus treads, and there have always been those who choose another road. So clearly the decision is not an easy one to make. We are tempted to take the path of immediate gratification, the one that seems to be the path of least resistance rather than the narrow path that leads to eternal life. As the church in our time is tempted to compromise the demands of discipleship that Jesus has called us to.

And Mary was no different from you or I. She may have been less tempted by all the glitter of our materialist culture, but she would have been just as tempted to take what appears to be the safe road rather than the one involving risk. She could have convinced herself that either this child was not going to be the king that the angel said it would be, or that the entire vision was just a dream of some sort.

Which is why Elizabeth is so important to her and to us. Elizabeth, too, carries a child who is destined to the same kind of greatness as the child Mary is carrying, one who will be a great servant of God and one who will face the same opposition as Jesus does, one who will also be arrested and executed by those who would resist God’s kingdom and try to preserve their own. Elizabeth may have been just as apprehensive as Mary; this journey is going to be no easier for her than it is for her cousin.

And Elizabeth encourages her cousin Mary. Elizabeth serves as cheerleader in this passage, saying, “You go, girl!” “Blessed are you, and blessed is your child, and you will be revered for all time.” Elizabeth gives Mary a push! She dispels Mary’s fears and Mary’s doubts, and helps her to pop the clutch and get moving once again. And you can tell that Mary is back in motion as she declares, “My soul magnifies the Lord!” She is encouraged by Elizabeth and able to fulfill her task for which the angel has commissioned her.

Which brings me to the point: One thing that we must do, as long as we are determined to take the high road, to strive for what is God’s will for us rather than just pursuing our own will, if we are going to “let it be done” in us according to God’s word as Mary let it be done in her

according to God's word. One thing we must do is ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER, the way that Elizabeth encourages Mary.

We need to encourage one another because the road we are called to follow is the high road, marked with risk, and we know how easy it is to take the low road. We need to encourage one another because there is greater courage when we can link our arms and stand together, not to promote OUR interests but to promote GOD'S interests. And every one of you could be the person who encourages another to do great things. So who has encouraged you? Who has given you a push along the way so that you could excel and achieve and be the best you could be? And who encourages you in Christ, keeping you on the path of righteousness?