This past week, I visited my friend Ginger. The decades stretch between us in age but our seamless sisterhood doesn’t mind that a bit. In Ginger, I know more of God’s humor and hope for all God’s children to delight in the ordinary but delicious - in watching the birds gather in her garden, in sharing meals and good books, in a story that makes me laugh so hard my belly hurts. I could draw near to Ginger and her sweet molasses voice all day long because I could draw nearer still to her friendship and never find the end of God’s presence.

Perhaps such was true for Elizabeth and Mary, separated by decades but nothing else. Last week, we talked about how unlikely the two were as mothers - Elizabeth being too old, too barren and Mary being too young, too unmarried. The “way it’s always been done” didn’t apply to them and they knew it. If I were an anomaly to an entire history and to my particular context, I would move with haste, finding the one person who would understand. Who would dream with me. Who would withhold scrutiny and swaddle me in compassion. I would find my friend - the one who shared a boundless imagination and a faith that feasted on mystery in a world demanding certainty. I would know that it was all too good to keep inside.

When we meet Mary in our story this morning, she is full of excitement and an overflowing joy that compels her to pour it out. The Greek word used to describe Mary’s journey was translated as “haste” but it can also be “eagerness and diligence.” I prefer this, don’t you? It is fitting of someone who knows the radiance that comes when a light is shared and reflected in another. So Mary runs to Elizabeth. Can you imagine it? Young Mary, no older than a teenager, bursting through the door, calling her friend’s name. Elizabeth, Elizabeth. And when we meet Elizabeth in our story this morning, we hear how she is filled with the Holy Spirit and cries in exaltation. With this innate, physical and audible response, she becomes the first person in the Gospel of Luke to name Jesus as Lord (leave it to the wise elder woman to do the heavy theological work).

It helps to have a friend when you’re doing something new, doesn’t it? A friend who gets it, who walks alongside us. The writer Enuma Okoro says this of Elizabeth and Mary, “It is a testament to God’s care and provision that each woman has someone to journey with as she navigates the peculiar seasons in which she finds herself. The gift of a believing community can make all the difference in the form our challenging waiting seasons take.”

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It helps to have a friend when you’re doing anything, doesn’t it? And it hurts like you-know-what if you don’t have one or if that relationship is strained, broken, no longer here. This season abundantly reminds us of the social capital relationships carry from having a date to an office Christmas party to holiday cards splashed with perfectly backlit families to songs on the radio crooning romantic nothings. What if you’ve moved to a new city and have no money left to travel home or at Thanksgiving words became weapons in your family and Christmas alone sounds far safer? What if this is the first Christmas without him or without her? It can hurt.

Maybe the relationship Mary and Elizabeth nurtured tells us something about how to navigate through that kind of hurt rather than try and erase it, numb it. Something about reaching across generations and tending to one another in all manner of things to come. Okoro writes, “The narrative leaves out so much information concerning the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth. Perhaps we can imaginatively consider the space they shared during Mary’s three-month visit...They could share their excitement as well as their fears, possible anxieties, and insecurities of being suited for the tasks before them. Even with the level of faith they possessed, they must have experienced moments, if not days, of restlessness, worry, and anticipation. Elizabeth and Mary could strengthen one another’s hearts.”

Is this not what we’re called to do, friends? God’s hope for all people is that they know the goodness of relationships, a foundation found in the covenant God sets with us: you will be my people. And if you’re in this room right now, then you know at least a glimmer of the goodness of relationships because you are surrounded by people who reflect this hope - the hope that you remember: you are not alone. When I look back and remember my church relationships, they cross back and forth across generations and backgrounds and interests. I think of Joanne, the woman who taught me how to serve communion using a handwritten instruction sheet in perfect cursive handwriting. Whenever I felt overwhelmed by the gravitas of it all, I could look up and her gentle nod would assure me all was well. I think of Shannon who as a kindergartner taught me more about the mystery of baptism than I’d learned in all my fancy divinity school training. As we prepared for that sacred day over cups of frozen yogurt, she invited me in to her prayers and questions, a moment almost as sacred to me as when I poured water on her sweet blonde head. I think of Chris, my former colleague and supervisor, who held my anxiety with gentleness and showed me how to let it go. I don’t have that one all figured out but I do know that friendships - holy and blessed friendships - bear long-lasting fruits and when we draw near to one another, we are indeed drawing nearer still to God.

We each have the ability to strengthen one another’s hearts, just as Mary and Elizabeth did for one another. The model of friendship we see in them is one befitting of our church here and now. It is one that is beyond the ways the world tries to separate us - faculty, students, cradle Presbyterians and still

2 Okoro.
not sure how to spell Presbyterians, long-timers, transients and perhaps the most visible and unspoken dividing line - the younger and the older. The pastor of Raleigh Court Presbyterian in Roanoke, Virginia, Andrew Whaley offers this for us, “Elizabeth shows us that those in positions of elder wisdom can celebrate the gifts of the young and encourage their prophetic witness to God’s work in the world. [And] Mary has something to teach the young in the church: that they are inheritors of a story that they should learn to love and value.”

We are called to draw near to one another - to be friends who stretch across the divide and hold our hands, friends who see us as filled with blessing, friends who do not turn away when news is strange and unbelievable but rather turn to us and help us live into the mystery together. We are called to be friends who offer mutuality and compassion, who are honest and make space for difficult truths to be spoken. We are called to be gracious and gentle and generous.

This was the hope all along. You see, “God exists within a holy community, the Trinity. God’s self is a thriving community, and God created us to flourish in our interconnectedness and mutual support of one another. We need one another to remind us that all things are possible with God and to help us trust the narrative that God’s reign is both at hand and still to come.” This Good News that we’re waiting for - the star shining in the night over the stable, the tidings of comfort and joy, the sweet birth of a baby, the shepherds coming to pay homage, the entire world being changed in an instant - that Good News was brought not just for one ear to hear or one heart to know but instead, came to be shared and spoken of and sought after in community. Had the story been shuttered up in that stable, we wouldn’t be here, would we?

It takes friends to hold on to this story - this amazing, could-it-be-true news, turning over of “the way it’s always been done” to make space for the hungry to be filled with good things and the powerful to be pulled down from their thrones and the lowly to be lifted up. I know I can’t do it alone, can you? I need you and you and you and you need me and her and him and we need each other. We are called to draw near to one another.

May it be so and may we praise God with choruses of glory for the Good News given to us long ago and made new again this season: we are not alone - not yesterday, not today, not tomorrow. Thanks be. Amen.


\[4\] Okoro.