

**Weekly Devotions
South Holburn Church
15th December 2020**

READINGS

How often have you thought to yourself, I wish I had a friend right now? Having friends are so important to life. They pray for us and care for us and challenge us when we are wrong. A true friend is willing to speak the truth in love and knows when we need a hug more than a scolding.

I am grateful to have friends all over the world: missionary friends in Japan and Indonesia, dear friends in the US whom I have known most of my life, friends in Scotland whom we cannot visit because they are in different COVID-19 tiers from us. Thankfully, we have Zoom and WhatsApp, but keeping up friendships were not so easy 2,000 years ago.

³⁹In 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 fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

Luke 1:39-45



REFLECTION

Mary and Elizabeth did not get to see each other much though they were cousins. There were no motorways or cars to zip them over for a visit, no phone or internet to connect them. Mary had heard of Elizabeth's pregnancy from the angel, and she likely would have wanted to see her. The Scriptures tell us Elizabeth was in seclusion, so she was not travelling, and it was likely that the rest of the family had not even gotten word that she was pregnant. Mary's trip would have taken four or five days and was about an 80- to 100-mile journey. Elizabeth likely lived in the hill country near Jerusalem, and Mary was travelling south from Nazareth. It would not have been easy for a newly pregnant Mary to travel that far over rough terrain.

Yet something compelled her to visit her cousin. It was more than just a need to see for herself what the angel told her, but there was likely a desire to talk through all that was happening.

Mary would have been facing lots of decisions and lots of struggle in the early months of her pregnancy. She could not likely comprehend all that was going on in her body, her mind, or her soul. She was becoming the mother to the Messiah. Perhaps she also wondered if Elizabeth needed support. Elizabeth, according to the biblical text, was advanced in age and had never been able to have a child. What a shock this pregnancy must have been to her.

Can you imagine what they spoke about? We have a little glimpse in the biblical text, as the baby John leapt in Elizabeth's womb and greeted his cousin the Messiah.

Mary spent quite a few months with Elizabeth, and they must have shared many conversations. What a time of fear and excitement it would have been for both of them! I am sure they gave one another encouragement and good advice. Perhaps they laughed and cried together over how their lives would change. They gave each other the gift of time.

At a conference several years back, I heard the theologian and pastor Leighton Ford speak on the importance of being mutual mentors. We can learn from those we mentor as much as those who are mentoring us. All that matters is a willingness to listen and be available to one another.

"In this busy and distracted world one of the oldest, most important, and most difficult spiritual disciplines is simply being attentive. Jesus told his followers to "give your full attention to what God is doing right now" (Matthew 6:33 in The Message). The poet Mary Oliver offers instructions for living a life in three short lines: Pay attention Be astonished Tell about it. The problem is that many days we don't pay attention, are not astonished, and at the end of a day have nothing to tell. Spiritual mentoring at its best teaches us to be attentive ones, calling us to the stillness, silence, and solitude which are needed to quiet our over-busy minds and souls." (Leighton Ford, The Mentoring Community, 2011, p. 22-23).

Mentors and friends share these moments with us. Sometimes they enter our lives just for a season and show up just when we need them. Regardless of how long we have known them, they are essential to our lives. Relationships do not just happen, but they are an intentional decision. The Lord gave me a dear friend soon after my mother died. This mentor is close to my mother's age, and she is someone God dropped in my life at just the right time. She has told me that I have been an encouragement and mentor to her as well. Age is not a factor when "iron sharpens iron" (Proverbs 27:17). God uses all of us

to impact the lives of those around us and to be impacted ourselves by those we let into our lives. It is a conscious choice to open ourselves up and one that we sometimes have to push ourselves towards. It is not easy to be vulnerable with others, but to share in life with another is powerful.

This year, as we cannot be physically available to others due to social distancing restrictions and are not able to spend time in one another's homes, we need to develop some creativity!

Mary and Elizabeth were cousins but sounded like sisters who did not miss a beat, even though they had not been together for some time. Though this holiday season will be different, and we will not necessarily see everyone we want to in person, we can still be an encouragement to others. These restrictions do not stop us from picking up the phone or putting something in the post to let the other person know what they mean to us. Be willing to ask if they need anything and be willing to go pick it up. Offer to drop off a meal or run an errand. Be a listening ear. Expensive gifts are not what matters, but encouraging and well-timed words can be worth much more than silver and gold.

Proverbs 16:24 "Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body."

May each of us spread such kind words and encouragement this Christmas.

Happy Christmas to all!

Julia

PRAYER

Jesus, Saviour,
King of Kings, who was born in the poorest conditions,
Remind us you walked these roads, you needed a friend,
You lost friends to death and you lost them to betrayal.
You know what it is like to encourage another and to be encouraged when you have had a hard day.
You know friendship is never perfect, but it is one of the greatest gifts we can give one another.
Thank you that you are always there for us so that we might experience your deep love and then have it to share with others.
Thank you for this opportunity at Christmas to mentor and be mentored, to listen and be listened to and to care deeply for those you have placed in our lives.
Help us to reach beyond our comfort zones and find those who might be feeling isolated or lonely at this time of year.
Help us to give sacrificially and without care for what we receive in return.
May we be your vessels of overflowing grace to others.
In Jesus name we pray,
Amen.

