

“Those Who Dream Are Not Alone”
Luke 1:39-45

Back in August, we had a church leadership retreat. One of the concepts we wrestled with is authentic listening. Our leader, Chris Joyner, shared with us about his parents and their struggle with moving three times. They left their home community to move closer to their son and his family. But with each of the three moves, they had reasons why the house was not quite right. After the third move and all the trouble that came with that, Chris finally realized that he did not really listen deeply and authentically to his parents. The issue was never about the problems they encountered in the new homes. It was instead about their longing to be with their hometown community which they missed deeply. When he finally listened to their longing, they were able to figure out what was going on, even when a solution didn't emerge right away.

It is hard work listening and being present to one another. There are so many voices clamoring for our attention and our time. Most of the time, there are also conflicting voices about all aspects of life. We are sometimes afraid to share our true hearts with others for fear of judgment. As a result, we have learned to listen or share half-heartedly or with our preconceived notions and judgments. A great example of not listening to the other person's heart comes from the movie Patch Adams in a scene when a doctor was supposed to be listening to Patch Adams to help him with his depression. But what does he do? Everything else but listen! Patch Adams was suicidal, but the doctors didn't seem to want to listen to him. The other patients end up helping him. That is when he decides to go to medical school to change the way medical care is offered. Here is the scene: https://youtu.be/-V-p_j2M6sQ.

We long to connect with others, and yet the barriers of fear, judgment, and shame often prevent us from truly connecting and listening to the dreams God puts on our hearts.

In today's Bible story we hear about the power of deep listening to one another's dreams. Elizabeth shared and listened to God's dream in Mary. Mary was her younger cousin, and Elizabeth could have taken on the role of judgment against Mary. She could have warned Mary about all the possible dangers ahead and made her dream into a nightmare of fear. Elizabeth was deeply grounded in God's dream herself and thus was able to provide the space for Mary's dream to unfold as well. When Mary got the news of her pregnancy, she went to visit her relative/cousin Elizabeth for three months. This would have been a long journey of about 80 miles. One would not take that kind of journey lightly. Mary spent the first three months of her pregnancy with Elizabeth. We know that the first three months are the most critical in any pregnancy. Without the support of Elizabeth, Mary could not have made it through this challenge in her life. Her ability to carry out the mission and dream of her life depended on Elizabeth's deep listening, support, and mentoring. Elizabeth was the best support Mary could have had. We know this from the story of Elizabeth herself and from the greeting she gave Mary when she first saw her.

Elizabeth knew about faith, life, and brokenness in her life. She was unable to get pregnant for many years and struggled with the shame of that in her community. She was especially ashamed as she was the wife of a priest. Infertility would have been seen as a sign of God's punishment. Her shame was great. Yet, her faith was even greater. As the wife of a priest, Elizabeth certainly would have had a long life of prayer. In fact, just before we are told about Mary's pregnancy, we are told about Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah and their mystical experience of a divine messenger. This made Elizabeth ready to believe Mary and to validate her vision of God. She saw in the brokenness of Mary the very Spirit of God. It is interesting that the two women are the main speakers in this part of the story while, Zechariah, the priest is kept silent according to Luke 1:20, "But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." It is those on the margins who are able to know the power of solidarity and listening. They know that one needs others, and that community is essential for survival, while those of us who put our trust in our own power, often forget our need for others.

We need people like Elizabeth in our lives and we need to be like Elizabeth for the Marys of the world. These are people who share the dream of God and see its potential fulfillment in us. Love in action is about that kind of presence. It is about those who see the light, image, and dream of God in us despite our imperfections and flaws.

One of the people who practiced and preached this kind of presence is Mr. Rogers. In his commitment to the way of Christ, he knew the importance and preciousness of each person as a manifestation of God's light and love. In the movie "A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood," we hear about the story of one reporter by the name of Lloyd Vogel. He was cynical and doubtful about Mr. Roger's sincerity and impact. But Mr. Rogers treated with such attentiveness and care that Vogel ended up finding healing for his soul. Here is the scene that showed how Mr. Rogers listened to him. He said to him on the phone, "Do you know what the most important thing in the world is to me right now? The answer was: "Talking on the telephone to Lloyd Vogel." That kind of listening and presence opened the door to so much love to unfold in the reporter's life.

Our invitation today is to stay connected to the sources of love in our lives so that we may be like Elizabeth to others in our lives. One of the healing practices Mr. Rogers offered our world is this lesson: "Just take a moment and think of the people who loved us into being." And so we will take a few moments to do that. One of the people who has helped share the love of God with us for the last four months is our ministry intern, Whitney Scoville. We give thanks for her ministry among us and for the love of Christ she has shared with us. We send her with our blessings and love! Amen.