

Confidante

First Reading: Micah 5:2-5a

Second Reading: Luke 1:39-45

Just leave him be for now. He'll come around when he's ready. Who knows you well enough to say that about you; the person who understands how your brain is wired, how your emotions manifest, how your coping patterns present?

In your phone you have a list of contacts, but that list shrinks precipitously when you remove the folks who tend to talk but not listen, who interrupt your sentences before you get to a period because they cannot wait to turn the conversation toward them. You know what I mean, you are already anxious, dazed, and confused — *So, I went to the doctor, yester...* Before you can even place the day your life went spiraling, the friend has launched into a diatribe on getting her endoscopy approved by her insurer. The friend cannot read the distress in your eyes, doesn't notice the tears strain to break the dam of your eyelid. These friends are not malevolent, they are just a bit less benevolent than you need them to be in this world where the road between self and selfless is long, potholed, and has too many exits.

Here's a little hint from the world of introverts, as a general rule, people are not as interested in your life as they'd like to think they are. Extroverts will protest that they love nothing more than to be with others. They love people ... well, in their own way. Yet, as a general rule, folks like to talk more about what is on their minds than listen to what is on your mind. Their burdens are more significant to them than yours. Their opinions are more perceptive than yours and need to be heard above yours. Their worries loom larger, their frustrations are more egregious, their fears are more pressing.

That can be true of extroverts and introverts alike. But an extrovert doesn't necessarily notice what an introvert sees easily and experiences often. You can spend an entire evening at a social event without ever being asked a question about you, your thoughts, your experience, your hopes and fears. The room may be filled with voices, but no one is intentionally looking to hear from or learn more about a voice not yet heard. The room is filled with talking but few are actually listening.

Our own Gayle Ireland has spent a career navigating corporate networking events and helping companies attempt to listen to what people

think about everything from whether their potato peeler actually peels to whether their employees will tolerate removing the Keurig from the break room. In a way, one could say she listens so that the marketing and HR departments don't have to.

Her business necessitates attending corporate networking events, which she will tell you is not a place to go for emotional support. Everybody is talking but the only listening taking place is when they locate the person who can advance your career, or has a name they can drop when trying to get access to an opportunity. There has to be a payoff for you to be worth their time. Gayle said there are actually books to instruct you how to work a room to locate those who can give you something or help you advance. The books even give you tips on how to extricate yourself from those you discover have nothing to offer you. The folks at these events probably won't make your list of confidantes.

So, some friends are self-involved. Some friends are fun to be around. Other friendships are sustained not so much by mutuality, but by proximity. Why are you friends with some folks? Because they just happen to be the ones in the vicinity of you, though that doesn't mean that they are present

to you in a fuller sense. You are not going to call them to help you take your spouse to the addiction clinic. You are not going to share with them the trauma of abuse you suffered as a child. You are not going to probe your insecurities with them. That's okay because they probably wouldn't choose you to be the one to whom they entrusted these same things.

So, who for you has made the journey from acquaintance to friend to confidante? Your contact list gets shorter and shorter as you pare it down to those who are invested, or are at least willing to be invested, in you; and it is not because you enhance their resume or benefit their profit margin, but just because you are you, because you are cherished in God's eyes, and because their joy blossoms in supporting your well-being. We are often required to list an emergency contact, but who is your emergency confidante?

We don't know very much about the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth. We are told they are related, but we don't know exactly how, and yet, there are a couple of clues in our text today which would indicate that even if they are just second cousins, once removed, there is an emotional connection that runs deep.

Mary has just received the kind of news that would stop an avalanche in its tracks. Full stop, news like no news that has ever been heard before or since, and yet, the kind of news bomb you may at least have some sense of — You step into the doctor's office, not an examining room, the doctor's actual office with a desk and two chairs across from it, and people do not go into that room unless their world is about to come crashing in on itself, a test result that comes spiced with the dreaded words, *there's nothing more we can do ...* Deep underground in a missile silo in the western plains a soldier receives a message she has trained for, prepared for, and stands at the ready for, but if she does her job when the message is **Launch**, well, as David Wilcox put it, *If I do my job my job is over; If I start my day my days are through; If I set to work my work is over; Soon as I begin we'll all be through*, nothing left but a nuclear winter ... He's standing in the foyer when you arrive home late from work, there are suitcases by the door, and all he has are four words, *I am leaving you*; that's it, and it is over.

Nobody before or after has received news like this young, virginal ... girl, actually ... She is planning a wedding, and until this her biggest fear is that the ice sculpture will melt before they cut the cake at the reception. We are in no position to tell Mary, *Hey, I know what you are going through*,

because we don't. Even so, you may well know something about news that throws you upside down, turns you inside out, and rips every plan and every to-do list into microscopic pieces that cannot be put back together again, at least not as they were. After the cry, after punching your fist through the drywall, after cleaning up the shattered glass of the coffee mug that dropped when your hands went numb, there are a thousand places you wouldn't want to go, but there is someone you want to see, need to see, have to see in order to process this surreal encounter — Confidante.

Who understands how your brain is wired, how your emotions manifest, how your coping patterns present? Who puts up with the messy corners of your personality? Who do you trust to listen to your greatest fear, deepest loathing, and loudest lament without judgment or dismissal? Who will help you navigate the intractable knots of your emerging crisis without patronizing advice or insipid commentary? Who is wise, thoughtful, perceptive? Who knows the value of silent presence? Confidante.

Luke tells us — *In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.* With haste — the Greek word is σπουδή (pronounced

spoo-day), and it means a bit more than just being in a hurry, as it implies earnest intention, diligence as if on a mission. Lord help the person who stands in the way between parents and their child in the ER after an accident: earnest intention, spoo-day, with haste.

And you know Mary had some serious earnest intention if, newly pregnant, she slips into her Chacos and hikes from Nazareth to the Judean hills. That is not a trek for the weak. Mary needs, must, has to see Elizabeth. Now, one thing you need to know about Elizabeth is that she was one thoroughly churched individual. Elizabeth is married to a priest, and Luke tells us that she is a descendant of Aaron, the Levite straight from the priests hall of fame, brother of Moses, priest for the Exodus ... and in addition, Elizabeth bore the name of Aaron's wife. The priesthood was sort of the family business for the Levites, so when Elizabeth went to a family reunion there were a lot of shuffling feet and awkward glances when it came time for the blessing before the covered dish.

Luke has told us that Elizabeth was faithful, blameless according to the commandments, but she was advancing in age and had not been able to bear children, which made her the subject of gossip and derision in the

community. Of course, the gossip and innuendo wouldn't stop when she actually did become pregnant following an angel's prophecy to her husband Zechariah. We are not told if the reason was the gossip or the travails of a difficult pregnancy, but Luke says, Elizabeth had gone into seclusion for five months.

Even in the best of circumstances, a pregnancy is all consuming, so there is limited bandwidth for concerns outside of what is going on in you and happening right around you. Yet, in the midst of all this, there is a knock at the door. *Elizabeth, are you here? It's me, Mary.* And with that greeting, an energy courses through Elizabeth's whole being. All of her own pains and travails are for this moment swept under the rug, and Elizabeth's full attention and intention become focused solely on Mary. Now, we know Mary was told about Elizabeth's pregnancy, but there is no mention that Elizabeth knew about Mary's pregnancy or that she expected Mary's visit. There was no Instagram for baby bump photos.

Elizabeth may have even thought the knock on the door was another neighbor dropping off a casserole, or possibly the town's midwife dropping by to check her vitals. However, with just the sound of Mary's voice,

Elizabeth knew the whole world was about to change, and not only that, the child in her womb sensed the earthquake that was about to break all of time in half. There would be a world before Jesus and a world with Jesus. A broken world will not resist the earnest intention of a redeeming God.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy."

Luke, here, is subtly staking out an important theological point. An older woman was barren much like her ancestors Sarah and Hannah, and thus she represents the old covenant where barrenness vs. pregnancy could make or break a kingdom. Now pregnant, Elizabeth's yet to be born son, John, will become a prophet. He will bring the old covenant to an end and announce the coming of the new. Likewise, the young Mary signifies the new covenant that is coming, and her child will be the Lord of this new covenant, announced and introduced by Elizabeth's son. Through Elizabeth

and Mary, God is doing a new thing, and as with Mary, who was so eager and intent to find Elizabeth, God, through Elizabeth and Mary, reveals eager intent in bringing to pass the reconciliation of the world.

John and Jesus, central figures in the narrative of God's work of salvation. The last of the prophets. The Word made flesh. The story of their lives will become central to the narrative of our own lives and essential to our redemption. These sons of Elizabeth and Mary will shake and shape this world, not for a moment, but for all time. These sons of Elizabeth and Mary will both suffer violent deaths, and Mary will witness it firsthand.

Do you think Mary and Elizabeth needed each other? I believe so. Do you think either one of them felt equipped to take on the journey before them? I seriously doubt it. And that's the point, isn't it? Mary and Elizabeth are no more qualified for the challenges before them than anyone here today. Though there would be moments of loneliness for each of them as the road unfolded before them, in this visit they quickly perceive two things that will sustain them. First, no matter where their journeys take them, they will know someone is supporting them, someone is praying for them, someone would drop everything to help them, including trekking the *Outward Bound-*

worthy trail between them. To have that kind of relationship, that trustworthy confidante is crucial to survival, and it means the world to them.

Second, and more importantly, they learn that there is an additional guest in the room with them, and that it is this guest, this Holy Spirit, who has drawn them together, who will sustain them in their journeys, who will awaken the gifts within and between them, who will equip them for the challenges they will face, and who will not abandon them when the road seems impassable.

Elizabeth and Mary were no more qualified for their roles than anyone present here today, but what they did have was each other, bound by faith, love, and the strength of the Holy Spirit to sustain them. And guess what? It is not just a coincidence that we share those same gifts here. We, too, have each other, bound by faith, love, and the strength of the Holy Spirit to sustain us. This is the earnest intention of God, to whom we owe our thanks and our lives. Amen.