

Those Who Dream Are Not Alone

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- [0 : 0 0] For those of you who might not know me, my name is Richard. I am an elder here. I have been around the table for a very long time, for table years. I think basically all but the first like six months of the church.
- And so I have seen this community grow, expand, change, and become something more and more beautiful. And so it is a really special place to me. And it's always lovely to see everyone.
- So I have the opportunity to preach tonight. And before I do, I actually wanted to start out of curiosity. How many people in this room grew up with some focus in their younger years on Advent?
- It's like half of us. That's good. So I grew up in a tradition where Advent was never really focused on. And I understood the word Advent only in the context of those Advent calendars that like CVS sells with the candy.
- And I had earnestly understood the word to mean something like, oh, it must be a countdown for Christmas kind of thing. And I eventually ended up in a Methodist church and everything was purple and pink.
- [1 : 0 8] And I was mostly confused because I thought we went with green and red. I was like, well, maybe they ran out. The store might not have had it. I don't quite understand what we're doing here. But it actually sparked my curiosity because there was these candles, these pieces.
- And in some way, particularly while I've been at the table, Advent has been part of a liturgy that really has grown to be very important to me. It has grown in something that I appreciate to really take a pause.
- Many of you might know this, but Advent basically means, you know, coming. And as Christians, Advent is a time that we abide in the waiting, the anticipation of the coming of a Messiah.
- And I think there's something really beautiful in taking time to appreciate that anticipation. Now, the reality is, I think in some ways, because we already know the ending, that Jesus was born and does come, I think sometimes we miss the value of Advent together as a community.
- But Advent isn't only a season where we remember the waiting for Jesus as it was. It's also a space for us to wrestle with the waiting for fulfillment of promises to come.
- [2 : 2 4] And as we come to the end of Advent season, I'm excited to continue our sermon series, Those Who Dream, to emphasize that we need not dream alone. And in fact, in many ways, we're called to dream in community.
- Because while Christmas is the culmination of an end of one waiting, the waiting for the Son of God, we are still waiting. We are promised that the kingdom will be on earth as it is in heaven.
- We are promised that all things will be renewed. We are promised that justice will prevail. And yet, we are waiting. Pining for these promises to be filled.

Now, over the past few weeks, we've explored as a community various themes of hope and peace and joy, often in spite of the world experienced. And today, we'll explore the power of community as a representation of love, to power dreams in a place that can feel unreachable.

Put more simply, those who dream, those who hope for that world promised, those who hold on to what will be, are not alone.

[3 : 34] And we are in that waiting together. Reverend Peter Gomes, in his book, *Strength for the Journey*, puts it this way. He says, The Christian faith is, and has always been, prophetic.

Speaking of the time to come, of the things that are not yet, of places we have not yet been to, of people we have not yet become. That is the image.

None of us, and no place, and no time, is good enough. Not yet. He continues to say that in Advent, we are reminded of the content of God's future.

So I have three points in this sermon, which will hopefully make a little more sense by the end. The first is this. Sometimes you're Mary. Seek community.

Second, sometimes you're Elizabeth. Be community. The third is, sometimes you're stubborn. Be open to God's fulfillment. Now, I've offered a picture version of this, if we can go to the next slide, courtesy of my husband.

[4 : 44] Sometimes we're Mary. Sometimes we're Elizabeth. Sometimes we're just a little confused. But it's fine. So, we're going to ground ourselves for this sermon. If anyone knows this, these are the fun dinosaurs.

I really think they're adorable. If you haven't spent time, I don't even have an Instagram, so my husband just sends them to me, because I like them so much. But we're very much getting off track, because we're meant to be focusing on Jesus.

So we're going to ground ourselves for this sermon by returning to Luke and taking a look at the verses that precede our focus from last week. So we start and read in Luke 1, 26-38, that in that sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent an angel, Gabriel, to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.

That virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

Smart of Mary. But the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus.

[5 : 53] He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will never end.

How will this be, Mary asks the angel, since I am a virgin? The angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come to you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, so the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God.

Even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive in her sixth month, for no word from God will ever fail. I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered.

May your word to me be fulfilled. And then the angel left her. So what does Mary do after receiving this news? She seeks community, and she goes to her relative, Elizabeth.

Now the Bible honestly doesn't actually tell us that much about Mary. What we do know is that Mary is a virgin at this point, and is to be married to Joseph, or is actually married to Joseph, who is likely a carpenter.

[6 : 57] And while the Bible does not give an exact age, Mary is likely 14 or younger, which is consistent with most marriage ages of women in Mary's time period. In Matthew 1.19, we learn that Joseph was contemplating divorce from Mary because she was with child, and they had not yet consummated their marriage.

In Mary's time period, that would have been devastating. Societal norms dictate that if divorced, she as a woman would effectively be without value. We also know that Mary chooses to take a several-day journey alone to go visit her older cousin, Elizabeth, who was, according to scriptures, barren and well along in the years until very recently before that point.

So a summary. Mary, a pregnant teen, heads out on a multi-day journey alone, fearing divorce from her husband and trying to figure out how she explains to her barren cousin that she got pregnant without trying. Now, frankly, that sounds more like a Netflix special than a promise fulfilled, but honestly, I think that's what's so amazing about our Creator.

The promises are always fulfilled, but they are often fulfilled in ways that challenge the assumptions that we have built in our own minds. So this week, our sermon is focused on what preceded Mary's song of praise that we talked about last week.

News that is, frankly, just wild. I mean, listen, if you grew up in church, and probably, honestly, even if you didn't, you're probably pretty familiar with the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

[8 : 25] And hearing this story read has likely a pretty limited effect. But can we pause to realize how absolutely absurd this moment was?

Put yourself in your 14-year-old's shoes, and if you received news from an angel that you were pregnant, and you knew you didn't do anything to cause that to happen, what would be your emotional response in that moment?

This news had to be disorienting, terrifying, and yet Mary demonstrated strength in that moment, wisdom certainly beyond her years, and says, I am the Lord's servant.

May your word to me be fulfilled. Now, in that moment, though, we read that Mary is gifted with something incredible, community. See, together, Mary and her cousin Elizabeth find courage and comfort in each other, both experiencing deeply unusual circumstances.

Now, while at the end of that moment, Mary says, may your word to me be fulfilled, I would imagine there was some amount of doubt. Mary still holds on to this promise and dreams for it to be fulfilled, but she also then seeks out community, and Elizabeth abides with Mary through what is, even if an amazing promise, still likely a difficult time.

[9 : 45] In some ways, the emotion in the moment is lost on us because most of us have read the rest of the chapter or the rest of the book. We kind of know the ending.

We know how Mary's story ends. Her raising of Jesus with Joseph, the fulfillment of God's promise to send a Messiah, the new covenant that comes through the son that she bore, the incarnation of God, a lived-out gospel of love and justice and hope.

And it's easy to see experiences in the past differently when we all know that it works out. It's much harder to maintain that perspective when we are living in the part of that that just really sucks.

It's harder to abide in the waiting. Now, if we keep reading about Mary's visit to Elizabeth, we learn that the first thing that happens when Mary arrives to Elizabeth's house is that Elizabeth gives her a warm greeting.

She reaffirms her in her hope and in the promise that she was given. She celebrates in that hope with her. Whatever doubts might have grown during her trip to her cousins, whatever little questions grew into giant existential crises as she thought further about this message, and whatever fears and anxieties and worries developed once Gabriel was gone, Elizabeth was present with Mary in her hope.

[11 : 07] And God has provided us Elizabeth's too. See, we're called to live in community, to experience God's love and care through each other. God's love can be most present when we are dreaming and hoping together.

This is honestly why I think it's so important that we find a church or a community where we can live out our faith together. There are, and I will tell you this up front, I have no shame in this, there are much better preachers on the internet.

I promise you that. And you should listen to them. There are better books out there. There are, you can always learn more and learn from a lot of different spaces. And particularly now, when everything is so available, there is a boundless amount of knowledge.

But when we're only learning and never living in community, we're losing out of part of what we're called to in growing in God. And so these moments, you know, here I go losing my place.

I'm sorry, y'all. See, this is why I should just not be up here sometimes. Anyways.

[12 : 21] So all that being said, you know, it's this community that we have that reminds us that we're not wrong to continue to dream and hope and trust for what has been promised.

Because community is where we're reminded of God's love for us. So we talk a lot about this idea of God is love. And when I think about that dream, right, that hope that we're holding on to in community together, that's about God's love being present throughout the world.

Theologian Patrick Chang defines radical love as love that is so extreme that it dissolves existing boundaries. This is the love that God is.

The love that we as a community are called to embody. And when I think about that, what that love looks like in community, I think a lot about the role of Christian community in my own life.

So I have definitely talked about my college roommates before. But basically, and some of you may know, I went to college and I lived with the same seven guys throughout college.

[13 : 29] We all met in a freshman Bible study. And every year, we actually still get together for our annual bonanza. And yes, that is as dorky as it sounds.

But why I share this is that my sophomore year of college, I had a dream that felt unattainable. Looking back, it really wasn't a big deal. And, you know, I think past it, and I'm like, oh, why was I so concerned?

But in the moment, it felt like everything. Just like the story of Jesus' miraculous birth, looking back from my vantage point now, where I see where the story ends up, it almost feels silly to reengage in the emotions.

But, you know, at the time, I was convinced, and I was like, I have the audacity to believe that you could be Christian and gay. And to me, in that moment, it might as well have been immaculate conception, because honestly, that's how impossible it felt.

Now, some of you honestly, and thankfully, have grown up in context, perhaps due to age or geography, where this claim seems pretty easy to understand. Like, yeah, duh. And I mean, we share a community here that affirms its commitment to LGBTQ inclusion and its invitation at the beginning of every service.

[14 : 44] But honestly, the 90s, the 2000s, and even the early 2010s, and frankly, some places now, that's not necessarily true. And so I dreamed of a space like this, but it seemed far-fetched and unattainable.

And yet, this community, this group of seven guys who were from all over the place and had different experiences, surprised me. And in a variety of ways, they said that we love you and we're here to sojourn with you.

And when it came to showing up, to being my Elizabeths, they were there. Now, I'd be lying to you if I didn't have fears and anxieties and doubts and questions and probably still do.

And since we're talking a lot about vulnerability, I want to be honest with you. I actually think that that 14-year-old girl named Mary probably handled her situation much better than I did. And I have a lot to learn from her.

And while with abundant strength, Mary responded, I'm the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled. I think my response was much more like, eh, are you sure? This seems like a bad idea.

[15 : 53] And I share that with you in some ways, even though it's a small moment of a dream, because it felt impossible at the time. And it wasn't.

See, the full and radical inclusion that the gospel promises included all of us as well. And without my community showing God's love throughout that time, I don't know if I would have been able to hold on to the hope through what was, frankly, some really challenging moments.

But this is the beauty of the gospel and of living that gospel in community, that we're not alone in our dreaming and we're not alone in our pining for what has been promised.

So fast forward to now. I've been thinking a lot about the community that my family and I have gained through the table. Now, I want to start with an important caveat. This is reality, right?

No community is perfect. The table is no exception. Church is a human institution attempting to reflect God to the world. And as a human institution, it is inherently flawed, can always be better, and sometimes will mess up.

[17 : 00] That being said, this church community has been an amazing one that has sat with myself and with my family in our waiting. I turn to people in this space when I feel tired and worn down and find new energy to keep dreaming, to keep hoping for what is promised.

And while the table has been with us for many chapters of our lives, and I feel like are forever recorded in a variety of sermons that I've given at this church, so if you ever want to listen, feel free to look back.

Our most recent chapter has actually been parenthood. Now, there's a lot of things going on there and a lot of questions I have still, and frankly, the arc from definitely can't be gay and Christian to elder married to a man raising a child in church in itself is a journey that required beautiful displays of God's love through community at every step.

But that's another story that I'm always glad to share over coffee. But when my husband Richard asked me an interesting question that I think he thought was innocent but got me spiraling down to all these other questions, he said, well, how is this idea of abiding, of waiting for promises to be fulfilled impacting you now?

And honestly, I like to talk about things that have already been wrapped up because they're easier. But he got me thinking, and I realized in some ways that I see the urgency in promises differently since caring for an infant.

[18 : 28] I feel a different urgency to protect our young one from the brokenness that's around us. I wonder how we both teach him to dream and hope while also cautioning him on how to keep safe.

I fear the magnitude of ways he might be othered as a brown child of an interracial same-gender couple. I mean, when we thought about his name, we tested it with friends to figure out how they would make fun of him with it.

And that, if I'm honest, makes it hard to abide in promises. I'm still wrestling with how to do that well. And it's all a bit overwhelming, mostly because I haven't been able to see how it ends.

But, what I do know is that I am rejuvenated by the beauty of the community that has surrounded us. The many aunts and uncles who have shown up from this community cared for him and loved him.

I have been humbled by the outpouring of love from this community during this journey and inspired by how it reflects God's love to us and to him.

[19 : 36] And I imagine the day when he's old enough and bored or annoyed with us where he can just, like, hop to a bunch of different houses of people at the church and complain about us and find great people to do so to.

And that he will have all of these different beautiful versions of what it looks like to follow God. And when I situate myself here in community and love, the fears of the future don't go away but they are buoyed by the hope I feel when sojourning with others.

So, God's promises are promises of radical love. The love that is so extreme that it dissolves existing boundaries. And I believe in this.

I dream about this. I hope in this. But sometimes I find that that dream hard to hold on to. I'm exhausted. I'm weary. I'm worried.

That's when I need community most. Sometimes we are merry. We are dreaming of or hoping in something that feels extraordinary.

[20 : 45] And though we know it will be true, that doesn't always mean we feel that it will come to be true. Especially when the world around us feels like it is actively working against that dream coming to fruition.

This is when we need to seek community. To seek out others that can journey with us to keep that dream, that hope, centered.

Now here's the flip side of that. God works through us. We are God's love demonstrated on this earth. So we are called to accompany others. We may not be Mary in the moment or may not be Mary in a particular situation.

We may be the Elizabeth. We are called to carry and support and encourage one another's dreams because bearing that burden alone can be just too much.

See, what's interesting about this narrative in Luke is that in this miraculous story, not only does the angel show up and say, hey Mary, don't be afraid, but FYI, you're pregnant. Gabriel also informed Mary that she has someone who will understand her in Elizabeth.

[21 : 53] God has provided Mary community in a moment that God knows is going to be difficult. Just yesterday, some of us were in this very space celebrating the life of one of our prior elders.

Many of you know Miss Joyce Matthews. For those of you who knew her, words fail to describe her presence, her power. As I was sitting here yesterday, I was reminded of how well she modeled God's love in her presence with others.

So many people were able to talk about the time that Miss Joyce lifted them up, reminded them how to dream, encouraged them to keep moving forward. She was an Elizabeth.

She sat with people in pain, wrote encouraging emails, listened, and heard. She kept dreams alive with a radical faith that demonstrated this radical love that God is.

Now we are all called to lift up each other, to abide with each other, and to love one another. Now I also think it's important to note that Elizabeth wasn't without her own challenges.

[23 : 00] Right? We don't want to forget that just six months prior, she had discovered her own surprising pregnancy. And if you've read the story, you know that her husband is also mute this entire time, and she doesn't actually have an explanation of why at this point.

She just knows he's not talking to her. So it's not like her life was perfectly put together. And I mention this because I don't want any of us to think that just because we need community to help us keep dreaming, that we can't be community to inspire others to keep dreaming as well.

We're often playing both roles. That's the beauty of community. So my final point that I want to make is that sometimes we are stubborn, and we need to be open to God's fulfillment.

Why do I say this? Because God has a habit of fulfilling their promises in unexpected ways. Jesus is an excellent example. The Jewish people had been waiting. This Advent season is about their waiting for centuries for a Messiah.

And over that time, they had created an earthly image of who that Messiah would be. They imagined a ruler or a king, a political head, one that conformed to the ways that humanity had crafted their religion and what they understood power to be.

[24 : 16] People had created an image of what a Messiah would be, so much so that they weren't open to God's fulfillment of their promises because it didn't look like what they expected it to.

Jesus brought a new way of thinking, a new kingdom, and turned the world on its head. He taught messages of justice and love and radical inclusion and challenged the earthly authorities.

And so many people missed it because Jesus didn't fit into their limited view of what a Messiah could be, what a promise fulfilled could look like. Similarly, Mary would not be the vessel through which people would expect the Son of God to come through, God incarnate.

They expected a Messiah to be born, with power, with nobility, with money, with something. And instead was born of humbleness. And in fact, we see in the Bible, if you read the first chapter of John, this recorded question of what good can come out of Nazareth, which is where Jesus is from, in case you didn't know.

So, the reality, though, is what we underestimate, God elevates all the time in beautiful and unforeseen ways.

[25 : 32] and over and over again, the Bible is full of stories of God taking what the world discards, devalues, or even shames, and uses that to God's glory.

So don't be stuck in what we expect those promises fulfilled to look like. Be open to God's promises fulfilled in God's way rather than yours. And I say this because sometimes the people we find community with may not look like what we expect community to look like.

And I encourage you to be open to that. So, summary, sometimes you're Mary. Seek community in those moments because community allows us to experience God's love and renews our ability to endure in our hopes.

Sometimes you're Elizabeth. Be community because we are called to be God's love on earth and part of that is supporting and comforting our community and helping them hold on to hopes unfulfilled.

And the third is sometimes you're stubborn. Be open to God's fulfillment because our own constructs rarely match up with the magnificence that God has in store. And the third is also about how do I understandance and vegetableswith and■■ continue to manage and nice to remember that the portion of the 14 is a little bit that was harmful but and I hope it indeed V is amen■■ that it is it is mystery Oh I