



We Don't Do This Alone

TEXT
Luke 1:39-48

December 20, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In the Netflix series “The Queen’s Gambit,” 9-year-old Beth Harmon attends an orphanage where she is befriended by Jolene, who asks her, “What was the last thing your mother said to you? I like to ask that question.” Beth also meets Mr. Shaibel, the custodian. He teaches her to play chess. She is a prodigy, and as a young adult she hits the national and then international stage as she strives to become the best chess player in the world. Her success in chess is equally matched by her lack of success in relationships, as this quiet, troubled girl lives life with little connection to others, save the pieces on the chess board, and substances on which she depends.

Fast forward a couple decades, Beth is at the top of her game in chess, but her life is directionless and falling apart. Out of the blue, Jolene knocks on her door. Jolene has followed Beth’s rise to stardom, but was surprised by how undone her successful friend was. She says to Beth, “I’m here because there was a time you were all I had, and I was all you had. I’m here now because you need me.”

Even when the world looks at us and assumes we have it all

together, we know in our own hearts we are fragile, questioning, and no one escapes the times of testing. We know it acutely at times, but it’s true all the time: We can’t get through life on our own.

Gabriel broke the news to Mary that God was going to do something amazing. But God pays little attention to the cultural expectations of when it’s appropriate to have a child; therefore, this gift of God at the same time makes Mary dependent on God if she is going to survive this. In a picture of courage and faithfulness, Mary says, “Let it be with me according to your word.”

Before Gabriel can slip back through the clouds, or whatever it is he slips through to depart, Mary does something unsurprising, really. It should be expected. She seeks out a girlfriend. In this case, it’s her cousin Elizabeth. They form a unique sorority, as Elizabeth is also in an out-of-the-expected-season pregnancy.

I imagine that Elizabeth had long given up the dream of being a mother. All of us, in one way or another, face the dreams of our youth and realize that some of them just aren’t in the cards. We learn, in time, to push those dreams to a different place in our hearts. We release our grasp, as

if they were possessions we must return for they never belonged to us.

I imagine Elizabeth had come to the point that having a child is something she thought would have been nice, but just not for her. But here she is with wrinkles marking her face and age spots on her hands, struggling with cravings and swollen feet.

Who would have thought?

When they see each other, Elizabeth barely gives Mary a chance to squeeze a word in edgewise. That happens when friends connect after being apart for a while. And then Mary sings.

Sometimes scripture says, “Sing a new song to the Lord.” Sing a tune we have yet to learn. A rhythm we have yet to master. A new song might be the perfect song for a new baby.

But the song that Mary sings is an old one. Her song is one of those songs that comes with memories attached. It’s a song that carries all the moments when it has been sung before. It’s a song like “We Shall Overcome” or “Amazing Grace” ... it has history.

Mary sings of a new day, a promised day we have yet to see, but a day toward which we are all living. It is a song that God teaches us to sing. For Mary, it’s

a cover song, and she learned this holy melody from Hannah.

Hannah lived about 1,000 years before Mary. But like Mary and Elizabeth, Hannah knew what it was to depend on God to survive. She knew heartbreak and dashed dreams, but she also learned to lean on God and never lose hope, and that's what she sang. And when Mary covers Hannah's song, she brings Hannah into the sisterhood she shares with Elizabeth.

My friend Chandler is a singer. One of the songs he sings is "The Great Storm Is Over." He and I have been part of a preaching group for about three decades now. If I have learned anything about this craft of preaching, I have learned from that group. And over the years, we have come to love one another. Like any group, given enough time, you'll face hard times together.

Some have faced seasons when they worried about their children. We would pray about that, and then we would sing "The Great Storm Is Over." Some in the group have faced frightening illness, or withering marriages, or struggles in their ministries. And we would pray and sing, "Alleluia, the great storm is over." I suppose the hardest was when our friend KC died far too young. The next time we met, we wept, we prayed, and we sang, "Alleluia, the great storm is over, lift up your wings and fly."

I think you will understand when I say, every time I sing that song, in one way or another, all those friends are transported to whatever room I am in.

You know what I'm talking about.

If I understand this text, when Mary sings, she transports Hannah into the room with her and Elizabeth. And here's the point: As faithful and courageous as Mary is — and she is — she is also wise enough to know, this life that God calls us to live is not something we can navigate alone. We need our people. Mary needed some girlfriends. But not just anyone ... she seeks out Elizabeth and Hannah, because they are women who know how to walk with God.

Luke has already told us Elizabeth is righteous and follows in the ways of God. And Hannah was tenacious in her faith. Mary sees the life to which God has called her, and she knows she needs teachers, mentors, a sisterhood ... and she chooses wisely. She sits with people who know how to be attentive to God.

We all need our people. We can't walk through our faith alone. We need friends, mentors, teachers.

So, who are your people? Who are the people you learn faith from? Who has taught you to sing the holy songs, if you will, that have carried God's people through days gone by? Who has lived with grace and hope and showed you what it is to depend on God?

If we are going to live the life God calls us to live, we are going to need some people.

Two or three times a year I reread Paul's letter to the Philippians. Those of you who are studying that now with your Village Connect Groups know

this: He writes this letter from Caesar's prison, but the letter reveals a deep and profound joy in the apostle. Even in this horrible circumstance, Paul is joyful. I read and reread his words, praying, "Teach me, brother Paul, how to know joy like that, even on a hard day."

I have others. I had a Zoom call this week with a few friends who every time I am with them, my faith is strengthened.

Who are your people? Who shows you what it looks like to trust in God?

If I understand the lesson this amazing teenager from centuries ago is teaching us, it is we need to choose our people wisely.

Do this for yourself. Take some time today or this week and reflect on who those people are for you, and then make a plan to spend time together — because life is not going to stop throwing surprises at us. And it's going to be important to remember what it is to walk with God in those moments ... to remember the songs that the saints have taught us ... to remember who we want in the room with us; even if they have to travel thousands of miles or thousands of years to be with us, none of us does this alone.

Thanks be to God, Mary shows us none of us has to do this alone.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermon-sermon-archives.html>.