

## **“Tough Love”**

### **Luke 1:39-45**

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#### **Fourth Sunday in Advent: Love**

This phrase, tough love, burst on the scene about thirty-five years ago. It describes a love that is connected to people who have problems. Tough love enables a person to help someone with their problem, instead of walking away. For this reason, it is the kind of love that has the potential to transform lives and restore relationships.

I believe today's text gives us an example of tough love. Mary had a problem and Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, helped her deal with it. They did not turn her away when she showed up on their doorstep, but took care of her for three months. What a difference they made in Mary's life, as well as ours.

As you would expect, this portion of Luke's birth narratives raises a lot of questions. Why did Mary go to Elizabeth and Zechariah's home after the angel, Gabriel, informed her that she was going to have a baby? What did Mary need from them? Why did they help Mary? What does this teach us about love? Who has modeled this kind of love for you? Let me plant some seeds that you can cultivate this week.

**Why did Mary travel a great distance, eighty miles, and stay with Elizabeth and Zechariah, after she was told that she was going to have a baby?** Luke never answered this question, which was rather unusual, given his attention to detail. Even the question Elizabeth voiced, “Why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me?” was left for us to ponder.

Perhaps the most obvious answer is because the angel, Gabriel, told Mary that Elizabeth was also going to have a baby, implying that she should go see her. Sounds reasonable; after all, Mary and Elizabeth were related and there was a sense of urgency on Mary's part.

I think there were other reasons, though, which can be discovered by asking another question. **What did Mary need?** Determining this may help us understand why Mary made this long journey, in all likelihood by herself.

I think Mary needed several things, beginning with a safe place to sort out her thoughts. You recall how Luke describes Mary's condition. She was engaged to a man named Joseph and was busy preparing for a wedding.

There was a lot to do to have a wedding in that culture. The celebration lasted anywhere from one week to a month. This was to allow people from all over the region the opportunity to come and get to know the new couple. They did this so that when the couple traveled, they would be among friends that would know them and help them along their journey.

In addition to planning a wedding, Mary and Joseph were busy getting their home ready. Like most grooms, Joseph was building a house and the furniture that would go in it while Mary was filling her hope chest. To say the least, this was a very busy and important time for Mary and Joseph. The last thing they needed was to be surprised by an angel, yet that is exactly what Luke describes.

*<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."*

*<sup>29</sup>Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. <sup>32</sup>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, <sup>33</sup>and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." <sup>34</sup>"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup>The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon 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. <sup>36</sup>Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup>For nothing is impossible with God." <sup>38</sup>"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.*

To say life was confusing would be an understatement. Mary's world had been turned upside down and she needed someone to talk to who would listen and give sound advice.

Who better for Mary to talk to than Elizabeth? What a wonderful mentor Elizabeth would be for Mary because, in some ways, Elizabeth's journey was not that different from the one Mary was facing. To a degree, Elizabeth lived all her married life in shame. She was unable to have children, a plight worse than death for women in that culture. She knew what it was like to disappoint her husband and be fodder for gossip. No wonder Mary made that long trek down to the hill country outside Jerusalem. As my friend, Greg Smith, pastor of the Scott Boulevard Baptist Church, wrote, "To get out of the glare of an unwed pregnancy, Mary went to live with an older woman who knew what shame was."

Love, acceptance and encouragement awaited Mary when she arrived at Elizabeth's home. It truly was a "safe place to fall."

You know how this story speaks to me today? **What a person who has a problem needs more than anything else is to be loved.** For sure, they need many things, but it all begins with love. Who among your family and friends is facing a tough problem and needs you to love them?

**Loving someone with a problem is not easy, is it?** It may just reveal how much you really love them. People with problems need help, which requires attention and time. Rarely is there a quick solution. Loving someone with a problem can stretch your patience and your pocketbook. So why would you do it?

**Why did Elizabeth and Zechariah help Mary?** Why did they take her in for three months? It wasn't as if they didn't have enough on their plate. They were going to have a baby, too, and they were not young.

I believe the answer is simple. Elizabeth and Zechariah loved Mary and were as committed to her welfare as much as their own.

Love won't let you say no, will it? When you want to walk the other way or slam the door, love just won't let you do it. It's that strong and resilient, as Paul reminded us when he wrote, "Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes and always perseveres. Love never fails" I Corinthians 13:7-8a.

Love has a way of reminding you of those people who would not walk away from you. It pulls up the names and faces of friends and family members who took you in when you had no place to turn or were at the end of your rope. "Pay it forward," loves says. It's your turn.

**Who needs you to love them this morning?** Who are you struggling to love today? Who can help you love them when you really want to turn and run the other way?

Why not begin with Jesus, who modeled this kind of love, no doubt, after hearing Mary tell him about the goodness of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Without them, he knew his life would have turned out differently. He was determined to pass this kind of goodness forward, wasn't he?

I believe he will help you do the same. He will put this kind of tough, resilient love in your heart and provide the wisdom, understanding, strength, stamina and patience you need, too.

The members of this church will help you, also. I've never known a finer support group for those who are carrying heavy loads. There is enough love here to embrace you and walk with you along your journey. Let us be your Elizabeth and Zechariah. We would be honored.