

CHRISTMAS THIEVES
LONELINESS—CROWDS WITHOUT CONNECTION
Luke 1:39-45

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WATCH/LISTEN: <https://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/christmas-thieves-loneliness-crowds-without-connection>

Someone called loneliness the great American disease. Ironic, isn't it? More social media, yet loneliness is rampant. Loneliness in spite of social media or because of it? But it's everywhere--the loneliness of the 90-year-old, in a care facility. The loneliness of a 15-year-old who feels no one understands. The loneliness of someone in prison, where tomorrow will be just like today and yesterday. The loneliness of a financial prison, enmeshed in payday loans. But even more, this time of year: The loneliness of missing a loved one. Most people in this room know that just as the holidays can be the most festive, joyous time, they can also be the most painful time. Our first Christmas without someone who is gone; or a holiday filled with personal illness or tragedy.

Do you think Mary, Jesus' mother, experienced loneliness? I think we have over-romanticized her plight. We read her story, knowing everything will turn out OK. But she didn't know that. She didn't know we would create nativity sets with her name on them, that towns and hospitals would be named after her. "Mary did you know?" "No, actually, I didn't!" She was a pregnant, unmarried teen. From our mission partners at Pregnancy Help Center, we know that loneliness is very real in this situation.

And yet, was she alone? We didn't read it, but according to v. 30ff, an angel spoke to her. In v. 34, the Holy Spirit came on her. But those are invisible experiences. When we're afraid, we need friends "with skin on them." So what did Mary do? She went to see her cousin, a trip of approximately 80 miles over rough terrain. Now I've never been pregnant. But from what I've observed, there is a bonding, a comradery, that develops among expectant moms. And did these cousins ever bond! When Elizabeth, carrying John the Baptist, encounters Mary, carrying Jesus, Elizabeth's baby leaps in her womb. When this verb "leaped" is used, it carries the notion of leaping for joy. Think of it. John the Baptist is an invitro prophet! And Elizabeth is the first human to call Jesus Lord (v. 43).

So, what do we make of Mary's actions in the midst of loneliness? Here's what I think. I think Mary's loneliness makes a strong argument in favor of the family, reaching out to our family in times of loneliness. But sometimes, that isn't possible. Biological family may be absent due to death, distance or disappointing relationships. So when biological family fails, this story makes a case for the church, a community of faith. The church is supposed to be God's answer to loneliness.

Years after her pregnancy, Mary would learn an important lesson from her son. "My family is made up of those who obey God's will" (Luke 8:19-21). And later, in Acts 1:14, Mary is gathered with the embryonic church, with her other sons and with her larger family, the

church. Jesus declared that there is a bond deeper than the biological one. So that when family fails us, there is a spiritual family to sustain us. There can be a tie deeper and stronger than family blood—the blood of Christ!

A few years ago, there was a study comparing the health and economics of various nations. How interesting that wealthy countries like ours have the highest rates of depression and loneliness. In the words of Shane Claiborne, “We are the richest and most miserable people in the world.” He goes on and says that we have “settled for a lonely world of independence and riches when we could all experience the fullness of life in community and interdependence. Community is what we are created for” [*The Irresistible Revolution*, p. 122].

The late Henri Nouwen used to have van Gogh paintings in his office, one of them vases of sunflowers. Nouwen would point out to guests, “If you look at every flower individually, they look quite miserable. Put them together in a vase and they become a bouquet that is quite attractive” [*Wounded Prophet*, by Michael Andrew Ford, p. 2]. That’s the church!

Who will carry you through lonely holidays? Partly relatives, but partly the larger church, undergirding you and reminding you of ancient, but ever-new promises. After all, what is the Christmas name for Jesus that we sing and repeat so often? Immanuel, God with us. There is no cure for loneliness quite like that one. Immanuel, God with us. Say it with me. Immanuel, God with us.