

Sermon by Rev. Allison J. Beaulieu  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
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## **In Good Company**

A couple weeks ago, Rev. Mike began his sermon with a story about choosing a Christmas tree. It was a great story about the Hoyts' tradition of waking up early, going for breakfast, traveling to the Christmas tree place, listening to Charlie Brown's Christmas CD, and then picking up their Christmas tree and decorating it. As Rev. Mike painted this picture for us, I saw an experience I wished I had as a kid....a normal, happy Christmas tree outing. I had to chuckle as my own experience came into full view. You see, one of my dad's least favorite required jobs was picking up a Christmas tree. There's a great chain of home accessory stores in eastern PA called "Christmas Tree Hill." Well, suffice it to say, we nicknamed our traditional Christmas tree search almost the same thing, with a slight variation I'd rather not say from the pulpit. Now, my dad was a great role model and hardly ever swore, but this was the day he did. The four of us, my mom, dad, brother, and I, would load into our little sedan (By the way, we always had a little sedan and never a van or station wagon or SUV, which made things a little more difficult.) We'd travel to the Christmas tree lot which was always mobbed with people. And then, my dad would go right to it--- he'd pull out a tree, stand it in the middle of the aisle on its stump, and my mom, brother, and I had to decide within a second whether we wanted it. For the three of us, choosing a tree was a huge decision that required careful thought and attention. For my dad, this was just a necessary evil, so as soon as we said we kind of liked a tree, my dad already had it in the net and loaded on top of the car. This bothered us and we complained, but my dad hardly ever heard us over his swearing and cursing of the Christmas tree. My dad hated carrying the tree, especially into the house where all the needles seemed to fall out on our living room carpet. He then always had a hard time putting it on the stand, but once it was there, we'd cut off the net and find a beautiful Christmas tree, except for the time it leaned at about a 45 degree angle, which just about sent my dad over the edge. The cutting of the net was my dad's last responsibility with the tree...and then he'd go out for a run or read

a book while we decorated. And there you have it, my family's very imperfect Christmas tree tradition.

Anna Quindlen writes a weekly column for Newsweek. In this past issue, she explores the meaning of the holiday season and offers a wise piece of advice to new parents. She writes, "The most enduring tales about Christmas are about recapturing those small moments. The truth is that once you've watched kids on a Christmas-morning high of ripping packages open, gloating over the contents for a nanosecond, and then moving thoughtlessly on to the next thing, you know that's not what they will ever take away from the day. You understand the power of that uncommon humdrum thing that glows in memory. That's what I would tell my younger self if I could go back. Find that. Worry about that. Make sure they have that."

I'll be honest. I can't remember the presents I got when I was 7 years old, or 12 years old, or 16 years old, but I do remember how fun it was to watch my scrooge of a dad help us pick out a Christmas tree. Quindlen recapitulates her article by writing this, "the essence of the season lies in figuring out what is passing minutiae and what is enduring memory. That may be the essence of everything." When I look back on past Christmases, the enduring memory comes from the people I was with. So, whether you have a good Christmas tree experience or a bad Christmas tree experience, if you were with people you love, guaranteed that memory will endure. It all depends on the company you keep.

In our scripture lesson today from Luke, we find two women in very good company. The angel Gabriel has just visited Mary and announced to her that she is to bear a son and name him Jesus. The angel also says that Mary's relative, Elizabeth, has conceived a son even in her old age. Mary then utters her faithful response, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Now, Mary's first inclination after this blessed announcement is to visit Elizabeth. We are told that she "went with haste." In other words, Mary was not wasting any time. Why was Mary in such a big hurry? Some theories say that fleeing her village was a way to seclude herself given the stigma of being unmarried and pregnant. Other theories say that Mary was down-right frightened and needed the comfort of someone older and wiser. But I agree with those scholars who say her visit has nothing to do with fear, and everything to do

with joy. Mary wanted to see Elizabeth in person so that she could understand that the “impossible” of her own life was inextricably linked with the “impossible” in Elizabeth’s life. She wanted to share her joy and sheer awe at what was happening to her. And, that joy was reciprocated as Elizabeth so joyously proclaims, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” Indeed, in the deepest part of Mary lied the promise—the promise that God would send a Savior, who would be “Lord With Us.” Even the unborn baby John leaps in his mother’s womb with joy, in his prophetic way, alerting his mother to the miracle of Christ.

Friends, there is something about this moment—this interaction between Elizabeth and Mary that transcends the ordinary. This is the first bond that is formed through the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord, as Elizabeth says, “the mother of my Lord comes to me.” That in itself elevates this relationship to a spiritual dimension. It’s ironic that Luke never mentions how Mary and Elizabeth were related...just that they were “relatives.” It does not seem to matter, though. In this moment, Mary and Elizabeth form a bond that is deeper than blood. One could say this is one of the first conglomerates of true Christian fellowship. These two women are strengthened by one another and encouraged by one another through their faith in the Almighty God, the one who sends Jesus.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book, Life Together, writes that “the physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer.” (19) Perhaps this is why Mary traveled to see Elizabeth. The angel Gabriel told Mary that Elizabeth was pregnant. Mary believed the angel with faith. But Mary had to be in physical contact with Elizabeth to fully experience and share the joy that was in her heart. Bonhoeffer observes, “The prisoner, the sick person, the Christian in exile sees in the companionship of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God.” (20) There seems to be great comfort in the company of saints.

John McCain, U.S. senator, recently wrote a book called Character is Destiny. In the book, each chapter is named after a virtue, such as honesty, loyalty, responsibility, courage, forgiveness, gratitude, etc. The book sparked my curiosity not because I’m a huge fan of John McCain (I really do not know too much about him), but because each chapter had a person attached to it. In other words, each chapter focused on a virtue and

who McCain learned that virtue from. For example, he learned about respect from Gandhi; authenticity from Joan of Arc; idealism from Sojourner Truth; self-control from George Washington, fairness from Martin Luther King, and humor from Mark Twain. As I looked at the table of contents, I saw a chapter entitled “Faith” and the name that was beside it was interesting. It read simply, “A Christian Guard at Hua Lo Prison.” I thought to myself, “This has to be good.” And, so I delved right in.

Before he became a senator, John McCain served in the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam War. He was captured and imprisoned in North Vietnam and endured a painful existence, which included torture. He was kept in solitary confinement and interrogated on a regular basis. Hate became the prevailing sentiment in that prison on both sides—for the Vietnamese soldiers who staffed it and the prisoners who were detained there. McCain writes, “Hate is a condition of warfare familiar to every combat veteran. There are noble qualities exhibited by soldiers in war. Love, compassion, courage, self-sacrifice have been expressed in the highest degree on all the battlefields. But hatred, on both sides of a war, is ever present as well. You come to hate your enemies, and not in the abstract because you believe they serve some hateful purpose, but in reality, and individually. Hate helps you to do with your own hands the awful work of war. This is war’s great tragedy, that no matter how just or necessary your cause, a part of you must become less human to serve it on a battlefield.”

At this point, you may be thinking what I was thinking as I read this essay—“So, where is faith in a circle of hate and despair?” “Where, oh where, can the Christ child be born in that environment?”

“During the time I was held in solitary, I was caught...communicating with my dear friend in the cell next to mine. For my transgression, I was kept overnight in a punishment cell tied very tightly in ropes. On this particular night...the door suddenly opened and a young gun guard...entered the room. He motioned to me to remain silent, and then, without smiling or even looking me in the eyes, proceeded to loose the ropes that bound me. His kind action completed, he left without uttering a word to me. As dawn approached, he returned to tighten the ropes before he finished his watch. In the months that followed, I occasionally say my Good Samaritan when I was moved from one part of the prison to another. He never allowed himself a glance in my direction,

much less spoke to me, until one Christmas morning, when I was briefly allowed out of my cell to stand alone in the outdoors and look up at the clear, blue sky. As I was looking at the heavens, I became aware of him as he walked near me and then, for a moment, stood very close to me. He did not speak or smile or look at me. He just stared at the ground in front of us, and then, very casually, he used his foot to draw a cross in the dirt. We both stood looking at his work for a minute until he rubbed it out and walked away. For just a moment, I forgot all my hatred for my enemies, and all the hatred most of them felt for me. I forgot about the war, and the terrible things that war does to you. I was just one Christian venerating the cross with a fellow Christian on a Christmas morning.”

Proverbs 27:19 says this, “Just as water reflects the face, so one human heart reflects the other.” Like Mary needed Elizabeth, like John McCain needed that prison guard, we need each other to reflect the love of Jesus Christ. We need to love one another the way Christ loves us and therefore shine the light of Christ to everyone, even our enemies. This Christmas, allow Christ to be born in you, and allow him to connect you to others in peace, hope, joy, and love.

So, in conclusion, maybe you have racked your brain this year trying to figure out how to make Christmas special for you and your loved ones. I think we make the recipe too difficult. Let’s take a lesson from Mary and Elizabeth--- all you need is some good company, which is Jesus Christ....and the ones who bring him to life for you. Amen.