

2021 12 19 – Lessons from Animals

Luke 1:39-56 (The Inclusive Bible)

“Within a few days Mary set out and hurried to the hill country to a town of Judah”

Your first question might be, “Within a few days of what?”

Well, today’s story actually begins with first Elizabeth and then Mary discovering that they are pregnant. Elizabeth’s is a surprising pregnancy because she has been barren for years and is now much older than most new mothers. Mary’s pregnancy is surprising because she is, according to the story, still a virgin. We also know that Elizabeth is about six months into her pregnancy when the angel visits Mary and tells her that is going to have a son. Within a few days of this astonishing revelation, Mary decides to visit her cousin, Elizabeth.

Both of these women are carrying children who will have central roles in the spreading of the Good News of God’s love. Elizabeth’s son will grow up to become John the Baptizer, a desert prophet who proclaims the coming of the Messiah. And Mary’s son is, of course, Jesus, a prophet, a preacher, a rabbi, a healer, the one that everyone has been waiting for, the one whose life and teachings we still follow.

The story tells us “as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, John leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.” Right away Elizabeth knew that Mary’s baby was special and she said, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!”

Like all parents, Mary dreamed about the life that her baby might lead. Of course, she had reason to believe that her child would do great things. The angel had told her that, “You’ll conceive and bear a son, and give him the name Jesus—‘Deliverance.’ His dignity will be great, and he will be called the Only Begotten of God.” In the prayer at the end of today’s reading we hear Mary thanking God for the child within her and also for the many ways that God has and will turn the world upside down. Mary believes that her son will have a big role in the building of God’s reign of peace and justice on this earth.

Yes both John and Jesus were special, but I like to believe that most parents feel blessed when they are expecting a child, whether that child is biological or adopted. The time of pregnancy, of waiting, can also be a time for hope as the birth of the child approaches. The time of waiting can be a time for love as a bond begins to form between parent and child. The time of waiting can be a time for dreaming as a world of possibilities opens up for the future of every unborn child.

But, of course, this waiting time can also be a time of fear and uncertainty as the threat of the unknown begins to weigh heavily on the hearts of the parents. And it can be especially difficult when a pregnancy is life-threatening, unexpected or even unwanted.

I’m sure Mary went to Elizabeth because she needed to hear Elizabeth’s encouraging words. Mary had a lot to worry about, especially how her family, her fiancé Joseph and the rest of the village would react to her unexpected

pregnancy. The news that the angel had given her was both wonderful and frightening at the same. At that point, there was still the possibility that Mary could stoned to death for adultery. Thank goodness Joseph eventually decided to continue with their wedding plans.

Of course, all of you who are parents know that once the baby is born the difficult part begins. Parenthood is not easy. All the hoping, loving, dreaming in the world can't guarantee that a child's life will turn out the way you want or expect.

I've often wondered about Jesus' upbringing. We know very little about his childhood. There's only one boyhood story in all the gospels and in that scripture he's already twelve years old. What kind of parents were Mary and Joseph? Were they "helicopter parents," watching his every move, or did they give him space at an early age to figure things out for himself? Would it have mattered? Would Jesus have been different if he had been raised by different parents?

This week I decided to do some research about parenting in the animal kingdom, to see if there was something that we could learn from birds, and reptiles and mammals. What I discovered was that their birthing and parenting techniques are as varied as the species themselves. For instance the website of the World Wild Life Organization (the WWF) tells us:

The bond between an orangutan mother and her young is one of the strongest in nature. During the first two years of life, the young rely entirely

on their mothers for both food and transportation. The [orangutan] moms stay with their young for six to seven years.

When it comes to African elephants, a new mom is not alone in guiding her young. Elephants live in a matriarchal society, so other females in the social group help a calf to its feet after birth and show the baby how to nurse.

After laying an egg, the mother emperor penguin leaves it with a male who protects the fragile hard shell from the elements. The mother then travels up to 50 miles to reach the ocean and fish. She later returns to the hatching site to regurgitate the food to the newly hatched chicks.

<https://www.worldwildlife.org/stories/5-remarkable-animal-moms>

These are three very different examples of animal parents who are deeply involved in caring for their young. It's interesting to note that sometimes the male partner is also involved and sometimes it takes a village to raise a youngster. I even found stories of adult animals returning to their parents for help and guidance. <https://ideas.ted.com/humans-arent-the-only-ones-that-help-out-their-adult-kids-heres-why-animals-do-it-too/>

There are, of course, examples of animals parents who are only around for a very short time or who have nothing at all to do with their young. Most birds receive at least a few weeks of parental care, but there is a chicken-like bird in Australia called a megapode that builds a large mound of decaying vegetation,

lays their eggs in the mound and then leaves them to incubate, hatch and grow up on their own. Most lizards also just deposit their eggs, cover them and leave.

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/go--baby--these-animal-babies-grow-up-without-any-help-from-pare>

I'm not suggesting that human parents should follow the example of the megapode or the lizard, but I do believe that there are lessons we can learn from animal parents. I think they can show us that there are many ways to prepare for a child's birth and many ways to parent once they are here. Of course, the most important ingredient in any act of parenting is love.

Mary had the important task of birthing and raising Jesus. I wonder what we, as individuals and as a congregation, could birth and raise together? Meister Eckhart wrote, "We are all meant to be mothers of God. For God is always needing to be born." It's true, as a congregation we are already birthing God's Love in our community and in the world. Just think of all the ways we let people know that they are loved: providing pastoral care, baking for Mental Health, providing space for Scouts & Guides, becoming an Affirming Ministry, and bringing refugee families to Canada. These are just a few examples.

But I also know that we could be doing more. So I invite us all to dream. I invite us to dream of how we could birth God's Love in the future. What parenting techniques could we be using to build God's world of hope, peace, joy and love?