

*(in a hushed whispered tone)*“Psst . . . want to know a secret?”

A secret shared makes a tight bond. Fraternal societies, or religious sects are mainstream public communities in so many ways. But within those circles, away from the eyes and ears of the ordinary public, there are secrets known, and rites shared, only among the initiated insiders. Shared secrets; tight bonds. Like college fraternities who protect the knowledge of their secret handshake, or the traditions of their initiation ceremonies, there is something powerful about holding a whispered knowledge between friends.

So imagine the feeling of intimacy and relief between Mary and Elizabeth when they greeted each other, as reported by Saint Luke in our Gospel today. They were soul sisters, these two, in a secret sorority with only two living members. Of course, long before the time of Elizabeth and Mary, there were Alumni from the Old Testament, this elite sorority included women named Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Hannah. The common initiation bond uniting the stories of all of these sisters was a pregnancy that happened due to the direct intervention of God, the giving birth to a son whose life would shape a chapter of holy history. Every birth is a miracle, and every conception is touched by God; but these few women in the pages of scripture were invited by God to share in an even more exceptional birth, to partner with God in the nurture of a son who would change history.

But back to our story of Elizabeth and Mary; when you look at the surface level these two women could not have been more different. Elizabeth was old, and Mary was a young maiden. Elizabeth had been married for years, to a man who served the Temple as a priest. Mary had never been married, but was betrothed to a man who was a carpenter. Elizabeth lived in the southern part of Israel, near the large city of Jerusalem. Mary lived in the northern part of Israel, in a small rural village named Nazareth. Unlikely soul sisters, don't you think?

But at a deeper level Elizabeth and Mary could not have been more a like, for they held between them a common secret—a secret that connected them to each other, a secret that grew within them, a secret they could not explain to anyone else outside their tiny circle of two. These two women had their lives and their plans turned upside down by the same angel

Gabriel, who came to announce to them the thoroughly unexpected news of their pregnancy. For Elizabeth, her pregnancy was the news she had longed to hear for decades, but for which she had long since stopped hoping. And for Mary, pregnancy was surely in her plans and hopes, but certainly not before her marriage to Joseph. And to bear the Messiah, the Savior of the world, through a virgin birth?—that was an unprecedented plan no one could have predicted. To borrow a phrase from the Star Trek , God was asking Mary “to boldly go where no woman had gone before!” So for Elizabeth this good news was too late, and for Mary it was too early, to fit into their anticipated life plan. But both women were part of a miracle, a special touch from God, and both were willing to give up their life plan in submission to God’s plan, even without a clear map of just where that new plan would take them. But this they knew: they knew their lives would never be the same, and that the children growing silently within them would change the world forever.

So what do you do if your life had been turned upside down like Mary’s? When you bear a secret that few could understand, even if you dared share it? When your mind alternates between crying and laughing, between profound wonder and profound confusion, every time you think about the secret growing inside you? You seek out someone who understands, someone who has been initiated into a similar sorority of experience. When you bear news that cannot be shouted from the rooftops, you seek out someone with whom you can whisper the news in a corner. And so when the angel told Mary that Elizabeth was also expecting, she knew just where to go.

Perhaps you found a similar solace in a small circle of trust and understanding when you lost a loved one, or experienced a divorce, or faced chemotherapy, or kicked alcoholism. A small support group of folks who have shared your experience, who embrace your fears, and celebrate your hopes—without trite clichés or judgment, but with sturdy and empathetic embrace—that is a group to whom you run when the secret within you is overwhelming. And for Mary, that small circle of trust was Elizabeth.

Saint Luke gives us the first words exchanged between these two women when Mary arrived unannounced at Elizabeth’s door. The baby within Elizabeth, now six months into her pregnancy, leaped for joy. And Elizabeth broke out into song reminiscent of the stories of their Old Testament Sisters. But after that, we do not have any record of the

conversations between them for the next three months while Mary stayed with Elizabeth. Wouldn't you love to know what they talked about as they waited together? Their conversation must have been full of shared knowledge, spoken and unspoken support, and whispered secrets of wonder and miracle. What a comfort Mary and Elizabeth must have been for each other! And what a bond must have been forged over those three months! Soul sisters, indeed!

We are now in the fourth week of our Advent Sabbath, the invitation to be still and know our God. We have been invited to be open, to be expectant, to rest and remember. How or where have you heard God calling to you? There is still time in this last week of Advent.

So a couple of suggestions:

- ✦ Take some time for yourself — even if it is while you are brushing your teeth or taking a shower — open your heart to God.
- ✦ When you wake up, don't get up right away. Do something delightful, use your imagination, be frivolous, be daring. Snuggle in the covers for a moment and feel God's embrace.
- ✦ Choose one pleasurable activity that is easily done and takes little time. Leaf through a magazine, take a walk around the block, sing a song you know. Do something simple and playful.

By our Advent Sabbath, may we join Elizabeth and Mary and say 'yes, my Lord' and the world will be changed again.