

Luke 1:5-45 (NRSV)

The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold - 5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. **6** Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. **7** But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. **8** Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, **9** he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. **10** Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. **11** Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. **12** When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. **13** But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. **14** You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, **15** for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. **16** He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. **17** With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” **18** Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” **19** The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. **20** But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.” **21** Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. **22** When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. **23** When his time of service was ended, he went to his home. **24** After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, **25** “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

The Birth of Jesus Foretold - 26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, **27** to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. **28** And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”^[a] **29** But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. **30** The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. **31** And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. **32** He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. **33** He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his

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kingdom there will be no end.” **34** Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”^[a] **35** The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born^[b] will be holy; he will be called Son of God. **36** And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. **37** For nothing will be impossible with God.” **38** Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her. **39** In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, **40** where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. **41** When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit **42** and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. **43** And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? **44** For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. **45** And blessed is she who believed that there would be^[c] a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

Footnotes:

- a. [Luke 1:34](#) Gk *I do not know a man*
- b. [Luke 1:35](#) Other ancient authorities add *of you*
- c. [Luke 1:45](#) Or *believed, for there will be*

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Luke 1:5-45 points to what many of us are looking for in our lives, the reality of true love. I believe that true love is a love that transcends the ambiguities of life, especially those of disgrace and inexperience. These ambiguities often cause us to question the presence of love in our lives and at their very worst they can destroy our relationships. True love, when we experience it, should allow us to respond independently from disgrace and inexperience and see a new path, which changes our routine expectations. It is the love of God Almighty, the truest love we all can know, that will bring relationships and events that will allow us to see true love as God's love.

To begin a path toward understanding true love we must start with our general questions about its character. When we have an encounter with love our minds seek to know if it is authentic and whether or not we can merge ourselves with it. In Luke 1:5-45, we hear the personal questions of both Mary and Zechariah concerning their encounters with true love. In their separate encounters with the angel Gabriel they ask: "How can this be, since I am a virgin? (v. 34)" "How will I know that this is so? (v. 18)"

They ask these questions after the angel Gabriel reveals to them the future arrival of two unexpected children they will raise with their spouses, John the Baptizer and Jesus the Christ. For Mary her doubt is mostly likely due to her youth and inexperience and for Zechariah it is most likely linked to his feeling of disgrace being a priest who cannot conceive children with his wife Elizabeth because of their old age. His feeling of disgrace

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is so strong that the angel Gabriel causes him to be mute, unable to fully participate in this experience of true love until the birth of their son John the Baptizer.

Inexperience in life may cause a person to wonder if they are worthy of love, or if they have done enough to deserve the love they are experiencing. Mary hadn't lived a mature adult life before this first encounter with God's love, although her total experience as the mother of Jesus the Christ must have brought her more fully into this experience as she dealt with Jesus' persecution and crucifixion many years later. Her encounter with true love in this passage transcends her routine expectations as she becomes pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit, embarking on a journey that will change her life.

The Holy Spirit is the seed of love in the lives of Mary and Zechariah, which plants God's truth. The nature of true love positively pierces through the realities they are living.

- **Have you felt inexperienced like Mary, facing an encounter with love that pierces the normal routine of your life?**
- **Or have you ever felt like Zechariah where the thought of such piercing love changes an aspect of your life that once seemed hopeless to you?**

The questions Mary and Zechariah ask may be similar to our own questions as we search for love. They may be symbols of where we have been concerning feelings of inexperience or disgrace within love. God provides answers to our questions in many ways and reveals to us truth that transcends our human expectations. God answers us by

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describing God's self to us. When God does this, we become aware of what's at stake, we understand the quality of God's presentation and its transcending true love for us. We hear Gabriel say to Zechariah, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. (v. 19)" Gabriel's standing in the presence of God reveals the nature of true love, which is good news that needs to be received and stood within. Gabriel says to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. (v.35)" This true love will be felt in our being, we will be covered and protected by it. When God overshadows us we experience life in a different way that allows us to have a firmer foundation in God even within life's chaos. The Holy Spirit finds a home in us and we experience true love, the love of God.

- **We know that people are not capable of loving us perfectly, but do we seek the foundation of our love to be rooted in the Holy Spirit, the spirit that God uses to cover us and bring us the daily good news of true love?**
- **Do the people we have in our lives resemble this daily good news of true love as God's love?**

Our realization of true love evokes a response. It is a burst of energy that must express itself. When we experience this true love, we give thanks and remember to let go of the ambiguities that once controlled our habitual perspectives. We hear Elizabeth say,

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“This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people. (v. 24)” Elizabeth gives clear language and a declaration that this encounter with true love has positively changed her life and moved her away from a feeling of disgrace. She feels restored to herself and starts to verbally express what true love is. She speaks with hope for the future.

Mary shows a slightly different positive response when she says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word (v. 38)” In Mary’s words, we find one of the most important aspects of experiencing true love as God’s love. Mary declares she is committed and willing to be in service to this future experience of true love. She has joy going forward in this service. True love has the quality of inspiring commitment in us.

- **Does the love in your life do this, do you feel redeemed by its experience and does it inspire your ongoing commitment?**

Some of our love relationships will have inspiration as an elusive element and even strong love relationships can have moments of wavering commitment. In those times we must ground ourselves in the Holy Spirit. Some of our relationships never seem to find grounding in true love as God’s love. They deeply disappoint us and cause us to question ourselves and God’s presence in our lives. To stay strong we must know and remember a difficult truth about true love, which is that it doesn’t eradicate entirely the presence of ambiguity in life. The important thing to know and remember is that true love

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daily and repeatedly transcends the disgrace and inexperience that is embedded in daily life. True love is transcendent within this context. We see this in the presence of the Holy Spirit as it heals and complexifies the lives of Zechariah, Mary and Elizabeth. We see it in the angel Gabriel who serves as a messenger for Almighty God. We see it later in the lives of the babies spoken about in this text, John the Baptizer and Jesus the Christ. True love lives on in the lives of John the Baptizer and Jesus the Christ as they became living symbols of true love. They both express God's love into their adult lives through their ministries, becoming perpetual reminders for our world that all our relationships should be rooted in God's love.

Let us remember that true love shows its transcendent quality within our personal experiences. Disgrace and inexperience seek to disturb our experience within our search for love. But the Holy Spirit that moved the lives of Zechariah, Mary and Elizabeth is dynamic and full of wisdom. This is our assurance with true love, that it will teach us all things in daily transcendent moments. May the Holy Spirit redeem and inspire us in this daily discernment of true love. May the Holy Spirit grant us wisdom in the presence of life's ambiguities, which continually seek to threaten the truth, that true love is of God and that nothing in our search for true love will be impossible with God. To God, be the glory. Amen.