

Shaming Women

4th Sunday in Advent (Year C)

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Young women tend to suffer from a lack of self-worth. Historically, women have been shamed into thinking that they are somehow weak, too emotional, or as if their contributions to the world weren't worthwhile. In more recent times, society has added to this shame by pressuring young women to be perfect. As a result, among other things, women suffer from eating disorders, are constantly worried about their appearances, and blame themselves for everything that goes wrong.

In our Gospel today from *Luke*, we just heard about another young woman who was under a lot of pressure. She was in her early or mid teens and found herself pregnant. Her soon to be husband, acknowledging her shame, wanted to minimize it as much as possible by divorcing her quietly. This young girl, of course, was Mary.

We are told that Mary went out into the hill country of Judah to visit her cousin Elizabeth, probably to find relief from everything. As it turns out, this visit was just what she needed. Elizabeth was so supportive of Mary. Instead of shaming her, Elizabeth immediately praised and empowered her: "blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." At the end of the passage, Elizabeth leaves Mary with an encouraging word: "blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

Mary's experience during her 9 month pregnancy could have been much worse. She could have found herself abandoned, shunned by her family, and even questioning her self-worth. Thankfully, that did not happen. Mary had the support she needed to carry her baby and be an awesome, loving, and gentle mother.

I think we can learn a lot from Elizabeth's reaction to Mary. Encouragement to those under a lot of pressure can go a long way. If we are honest, though, that has not been our approach as individuals or as a church. We have been cold, judgmental, and passive aggressive. We have wanted to teach others a lesson by shaming them.

Brené Brown, in her book *I Thought It Was Just Me (But It Isn't)*, deals with the issue of shame, especially for women. She calls it a silent epidemic. Brown laments, "We do not talk about shame. We experience it, we feel it, we sometimes live with it for an entire lifetime, but we don't talk about it." (3) For her, not talking about it perpetuates it. By talking about it, she believes that we can become more aware of what NOT to do to others. Shame has no place in healthy relationships.

Elizabeth shows us how to encourage those who are under the pressure of shame.

In fact, Elizabeth herself knew something of shame. She was an older woman who never conceived a child. Her life was a disgrace in the eyes of others. God empathized with her and gave her a son in her old age, John the Baptist.

Do I feel entitled to shame others? As we think about Mary and Elizabeth today, let us pray that we may replace our culture of shame with a culture of support.