

## Message: “Restored by Love”

**Kelly Clarkson, who sang “Jesus Take the Wheel,” once said,** “The thing about Christmas is it almost doesn’t matter what mood you’re in or what kind of a year you’ve had; it’s a fresh start.”

**We love the idea of renewal** and the related ideas of restoration, revival, rejuvenation or anything which refreshes us, particularly our spirit. A fresh start is like a do-over or make-over, the chance to make something new, lively, fun and meaningful.

**Hope is implicitly part of a fresh start.** It comes with anticipation and... expectancy. Edwin Cole said, “Expectancy is the atmosphere for miracles.” Elizabeth and Mary knew about expectancy, but this doesn’t mean their lives were easy. Let’s take a minute to explore their story.

**Today’s narrative is quite familiar to many of you.** But I want to offer a reading that’s not. In 2021, a new translation of the New Testament was published. Methodist pastor Terry Wildman was serving the Northport Indian Mission UMC in Michigan. As a Native American, he felt a “desire to provide an English Bible that connects, in a culturally relevant way, to the traditional heart languages of the over six million English-speaking First Nations people of North America.”<sup>1</sup>

**After years of collaborating with Native North Americans** from over twenty-five tribes as well as Biblical scholars, his team created the First Nations Version Translation of the New Testament.

**I invite you to open your hearts and minds and hear the familiar narrative in unfamiliar words.** Ask yourself questions: How do unfamiliar names paint new images of these timeless characters? Do they help us connect with the persons in new ways?

“When six moons had passed, the Great Spirit sent the same spirit-messenger, Creator’s Mighty One (Gabriel), to another small, out-of-the-way place in the hill country called Seed Planter Village (Nazareth).

There he appeared to a young virgin woman named Bitter Tears (Mary), who was promised in marriage to a man named He Gives Sons (Joseph), a descendant of the great chief Much Loved One (David).

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<sup>1</sup> Wildman, Terry M.. *First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament*. Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2021. pg ix

Creator's Mighty One said to her, 'Greetings, highly favored one! You are close to the Great Spirit and greatly honored among women.'

Bitter Tears was deeply troubled by this greeting and wondered what the spirit-messenger would say. He comforted her saying, 'Do not fear, for you have found goodwill in the eyes of the Great Mystery. You will be with child and give birth to a son. You will name him Creator Sets Free (Jesus).'

*It seemed like time stood still, and all creation stopped to listen as the messenger continued to speak.*

'He will be greatly honored, the Son of the One Above Us All. He will be a great chief like his ancestor Much Loved One and will sit in his seat of honor. He will always be chief over the tribes of Wrestles with Creator (Israel). His chiefly guidance will never end.'

*Bitter Tears' voice trembled with emotion, and her eyes grew wide as she looked into the face of the spirit-messenger.*

She asked, 'How will this be, since I have never been with a man?'

Creator's Mighty One answered, 'The Holy Spirit will spread his wings over you, and his great power from above will overshadow you.

This holy child born to you will be the Son of the One Above Us All.'

Then, to encourage her, he said, 'Your cousin Creator Is My Promise (Elizabeth), who was called barren one, is six moons with child. See! There is nothing too hard for the Great Spirit.'

*She looked bravely into the face of the messenger.*

She said boldly, 'I am Creator's servant, let it be for me just as you have said.' Then Creator's chief spirit-messenger left her.

Bitter Tears quickly put together a traveling bundle and went to visit her cousin Creator Is My Promise, who lived in a nearby village in the hill country of the Land of Promise (Judea).

When she entered the home of her relatives, she greeted her cousin.

When Creator Is My Promise heard Bitter Tears' greeting, she felt her child jump inside her. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and with a loud cry she lifted her voice and spoke these blessing words to Bitter Tears.

‘The Most Holy One has honored you more than any other woman,’ she laughed. ‘The child you carry inside you will bring great blessings to all people. Why is Creator being so kind to me, sending the mother of the Great Chief to visit my home? As soon as I heard your greeting, my baby jumped for joy inside me! You have been chosen by the Maker of Life for a great honor, because you believed his words to you.’”<sup>2</sup>

These are words of life for all of God’s people. **Thanks be to God.**

**This year, I find myself pondering Mary’s life**, especially what she must have thought and felt – mentally, physically and spiritually, during her months of pregnancy. In all ways, she waited on Jesus; as a mother, as a wife to Joseph, as one who found hope and trust.

**Think about how much she and Elizabeth trusted God.** Perhaps we men should spend more time humbly listening to women, especially pregnant ones, as they explain everything involved with creating new life; the pains, the wondering, the fears, the exhaustion, the waiting... so much waiting.

**What if *these* experiences were paired with the Advent themes of hope, peace, joy and love?** Can you imagine us lighting a candle representing fear *and* hope? Or pain *and* peace? Or misery *and* joy? Or how about indifference *and* love? How might these combinations help us connect with the broad range of our emotional experiences? How might these combinations help us connect with what Mary and Joseph and Elizabeth and Zechariah were experiencing?

**Today’s Advent theme is love, and trust is a big part of any loving relationship.** Through love, trust can overcome fear. ‘Cause Mary seems too young, and Elizabeth seems too old to birth new life. Yet, as an expression of their love for God, both trusted God’s leading, miracles occurred, and their lives (and the world) were changed forever.

**Maybe we’ve romanticized most of the humanness out of these women and their partners.** Nine months is a long time to ponder something, all day, every day while people point, stare and talk. Yeah, we know how gossip works. Thankfully love and joy came as soon as

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.susanvillemethodist.org/pastorsblog/luke-126-45-the-advent-of-love>

they saw the child. But before, there was waiting, bearing and hoping. We, too, wait and hope for love and joy while bearing our burdens.

**Historians estimate Elizabeth was between 60-80 years old**, beyond the average life expectancy of her era. Surely, she wondered, “Who will care for my child, my joy, when I die?” Mary may have prayed, “How will I know what to do once this mysterious new creation is born?”

**Can we put ourselves in their space?** Anticipating, *sensing* God creating something new in and through us... like Elizabeth, as we *expect* God to lead us into our shared future, who will care for what we’ve created after we’re gone? Will the next generation value what we hold as precious? Will they be as caring and nurturing as we’ve been? What must we do to ensure a legacy of beliefs, values and ethics is passed on?

**Like any new mother, Mary’s excitement was intertwined with questions and concerns.** God chose us! That’s awesome! But wait... with so many options available, **why** has God chosen... *us*? How will we know what to do when new life bursts forth and needs attention... when all we want to do is take a nap? How will we ever find the energy to keep up with life’s new pace? And how will we find the wisdom new life seeks when we’re still asking questions ourselves?

**You’ve heard the saying**, “God doesn’t call the equipped; God equips the called.” God *called* Elizabeth and Mary into co-creating the future. Of all people, the Creator of the Universe said, “I **want** YOU, I pick YOU **to help me** do something new that will play a pivotal role in changing the world.” God *calls* us in the same way.

**The same God wants YOU; the same God desires YOU to help change the world.** This blows my mind. But it’s exactly what God has done throughout history and continues to do with every single person. God *continues* to call you, me and our church family into a future of new creations. And it’s a future filled with hope and love, questions and doubts, “what if’s” and expectant waiting.

**I invite you to follow Elizabeth and Mary**, letting our love of God lead us into trusting God *even more* as we work *with* God and *with* each other to nurture what we already have, while we seek new ways to love the One who came so humbly to love and save us. Amen? Amen!

*Let us pray ...*