



**HOMILY**  
**SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 35: 1-10; LUKE 1: 46b-55**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**December 11, 2022**  
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

Isaiah 35: 1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus. it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. God will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. God will come and save you." Then the eyes of those who cannot see shall be opened, and the ears of those who cannot hear unstopped; then those who cannot walk shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way... it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Luke 1: 46b-55

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is God's name. Divine mercy is for those who fear God from generation to generation. God has shown strength with God's arm; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. God has helped God's servant Israel, in remembrance of Divine mercy, according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."

The Word of the LORD.

**Thanks be to God.**

(MMS in a rocking chair, humming for several seconds. Point to earliest memory of being mothered)

My mother knew how to rock a baby. That's one of my earliest memories—being rocked in the upstairs of our little house on 448 Boone Trail. It was like a little rabbit warren—too small for a family our size. It was home. I remember the wooden end table I could see when I peaked over her shoulder and the black phone with a rotary dial and curly cord that sat on the table.

I remember the feeling of home. Shhh. Humming. Rocking.

Time to rest. Time to sleep. Rocking my babies to sleep so many years later I could feel my mom rocking me. I sang my children the same song. “Angels sang, at his birth, lullaby peace on earth. Angels sang at his birth. Lullaby peace on earth.”

You are safe, you matter. That's what my body learned in those moments in that rocking chair, in that little house at 448 Boone Trail in Danville, KY.

That's not all I learned from my mother—there's a bigger story. And one I continue to explore with lots of support and tenderness toward myself. Just like every mother, she carried her own trauma into the way she mothered.

The gifts and limitations of the ways we are each mothered are deeply formative—but it's not just a script for how our lives will go. It's a story we get to help shape. And the way we reflect and relate to the mother inside of us plays a profound role in the way we are able to be together in community in ways that support healing—our own and the healing of our community and of the world.

It's a wonder—the power of the mothering capacity we each have inside us. It's one of the ways we can change the world by changing ourselves.

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We are born needing warmth and nurture, we are born with bodies that need a download of how and where and why we get to feel that we are safe and we matter.<sup>1</sup>

**(put up image of prefrontal cortex—in the sanctuary full screen, for youtube feed split screen)**

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Peyton's interview on the podcast, Therapy Chat, includes a clear and succinct description of the importance and deeply formative power of these earliest experiences of nurture and warmth.

**Sarah Peyton, the brain scientist we talked about last week, the one who is working to make your brain a more pleasant place to live, shares about what she has learned from epigeneticist, Moshe Szyf (“jeef”):** Our mother is in every cell of our prefrontal cortex. 86 million neurons, 1/3 of the brain is the prefrontal cortex. 27 million neurons in our brain carry our mother.

*[the prefrontal cortex is the locus of] **planning, decision making, short-term memory, personality expression, moderating social behavior and controlling certain aspects of speech and language.***<sup>2</sup>

*Executive function relates to abilities to differentiate among conflicting thoughts, determine good and bad, better and best, same and different, future consequences of current activities, working toward a defined goal, prediction of outcomes, expectation based on actions, and social “control” (the ability to suppress urges that, if not suppressed, could lead to socially unacceptable outcomes).*<sup>3</sup>

**(take down image)**

The care we receive in those earliest parts of our lives, can affect our DNA even more than biology.<sup>4</sup> Moshe Szyf (“jeef”), epigeneticists: not the biological mother that is the determinant, but the care-giving one. Our earliest care givers prepare us for life. Those contexts and experiences can change our DNA and our nervous system’s expectations around what life can be like.

We carry our ancestors’ DNA in our bodies—and there are things about that that we cannot change.

It’s our mothers, the ones who mothered us (whether it be your mother or someone else—other mothers who cared for you), our earliest caregivers, who condition us, who condition our nervous systems to have certain patterns and agreements in our nervous system and thoughts and behaviors to protect us from harm, from not being safe, from not mattering.

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<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.thescienceofpsychotherapy.com/prefrontal-cortex/>

<sup>4</sup> Moshe Szyf, epigeneticists, Ted Talk: [https://www.ted.com/talks/moshe\\_szyf\\_how\\_early\\_life\\_experience\\_is\\_written\\_into\\_dna](https://www.ted.com/talks/moshe_szyf_how_early_life_experience_is_written_into_dna)

Sarah Peyton talks about how her work is really an invitation to “update” the mothers we carry within us. We get to heal our own internal mothers. We get to see and experience the mothers that should have been had they gotten all of what they needed from their mothers.

We can actually mother ourselves and each other as we move through processes of self-reflection, therapy, somatic healing.

Our fixed DNA can learn how to function differently in new environments. We learn these adaptations from our mothers. But those early adaptations can become maladaptive in different contexts and they can create harmful patterns that impact our health, our well-being.

Stress that our mothers experienced while we were in utero can begin to rearrange our entire genome, and that rearrangement and reconditioning continues in our earliest days of life. We are learning what to expect. We are learning where we fit and what bids for connection get us what we need. That’s epigenetics.

Szyf describes epigenetics as a “dynamic movie.” The movie of our life is interactive. We can introduce new actors into the narrative, we can change our narrative and that can actually have genetic consequences. There is a layer of our genetics that is old and very hard to change. But the epigenetic layer is dynamic, interactive and can be changed.<sup>5</sup> Remember neuroplasticity—well it can change a lot of things—not just your brain. It can change your susceptibility to disease, to mental illness, to all kinds of things.

Our amygdala (the part of our brain that is processing memory and encoding memories) is constantly scanning for trouble. It’s the part of our brain that is set up to protect us—to tell us about fight, flight, freeze, or fawn.

Our amygdalas need lots of warmth and supportive mothering, the emotional center of the self that carries the trauma needs nurturing/mothering so that we can learn the sensations of “you are safe and you matter.”

This is what Sarah Peyton is referring to as a “mother upgrade.” It’s not a judgment on your mother, it’s just how we grow—like when we do updates on our computer operating systems. If we don’t do the updates, at some point our computers are going to crash!

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<sup>5</sup> Moshe Szyf and Judith Hall, “Epigenetics: How Nature and Nurture Together Shape our Offspring” <https://youtu.be/DslGKM3VQxQ>

This is very important work—and it is very delicate work. Because we learned early that we want to somehow find a way to belong and to feel like we matter. “Alarmed aloneness” that I talked about last week is not simply the fear of being alone—it is the deep framework our neural networks take on to keep us safe, to create conditions for feeling like we belong and we matter. How we secure those conditions is variable and can be deeply impacted by trauma. Bodies that struggle to feel like they belong are more susceptible to ingroup/outgroup binaries built on disgust toward the outgroup. We can see this playing out in our culture in some menacing and dangerous ways.

The same hormone that is released in breastfeeding, can be released when someone like Donald Trump uses the dog whistle of disgust toward whoever he wants to other. For bodies that need and want to belong, disgust can be a way to belong, to matter. We want to belong. We want to matter.

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We can teach each other and teach ourselves new songs, new experiences of warmth, safety—new sensations that we matter and that we belong to each other. We can be brave enough to extend our circles of belonging to people who are not like us. We can teach each other to expand our circles of belonging, instead of constrict them. We can teach each other to be brave about change and the choices we have.

Song—let me be brave-beautiful chorus.

Repeat after me:

Please, let me be brave

Please, let me see my choices clearly.

Again with me:

Please let me be brave

Please let me see my choices clearly

Sing it together with the support of the Beautiful Chorus.

**(play song for about 1:20—fade out at the end)**

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Mary learned a new song—she was probably 13 years old. It’s a time when our brains are changing a lot. Our brains actually begin to not hear our mother’s voices as acutely as we have when we are younger. Our brains begin to tune in to other voices that start to be more

compelling. This is a part of the important process of differentiation that we need to go through.

At that important age, Mary experiences a trauma—an unplanned, unwanted pregnancy in a culture in which this could be a death sentence in many ways—pregnancy is still a life-threatening reality for women. And in Mary’s culture, pregnancy was the portal to shaming and shunning if it wasn’t in an acceptable context. Shame and blame were and are powerful weapons in patriarchal cultures.

She had to be afraid. And her mother and her mother’s mother—and all the other mothers of her community—they all knew the power of shame to destroy a life, a family, even a community.

Brain scientists tell us that shame is the emotion that releases the biggest amount of the stress hormone cortisol—the hormone that signals the amygdala is in the driver’s seat—scanning for trouble, alerting all protective systems to mobilize.

After I was raped at age 15, I was so ashamed, that I told no one. I especially didn’t want my mom to know. I thought she would be so disappointed. I was ready to sacrifice the rest of my life to avoid that shame of disappointing my mom. Back then that was everything to me.

Many years later, when I did tell my mom, she didn’t know exactly what to do or say—her own learning about shame, her own traumas of loss and grief impacted what tools she had to respond to me in my hurt and vulnerability.

She did the best she could.

I learned to see that as I learned how to extend myself the compassion and warmth that I need. God has led me toward the healing power of telling the truth—not just for me, but for others, and for my mother. When I extend warmth and compassion to myself, I am better able to extend it to you, and I am better able to extend it to her—for the things she may have wanted to be, but wasn’t able to be, for the ways I needed something different. All those things are ways I carry her along with the rocking and the humming and the memory of being held and cherished.

God’s voice has been a mother upgrade for me, too—the voice that told me God can take the worst things that happen to us and bring healing and freedom out of the tragedy and loss.

The angelic messenger of God's voice told Mary something different than the shame and blame—you are blessed, you matter, and you are safe—you are held in the palm of God's hand.

It's a miraculous moment of the most potent mother upgrade we can imagine. God mothers Mary, Divine Love extends warmth and compassion to this young girl who is so very vulnerable, who is at risk in so many ways.

Mary can put her vulnerability into a bigger picture—into a major motion picture with a world-changing order of magnitude. This dangerous situation is not a sign of her shamefulness, but a turning point in her blessedness, in her own capacity to be a carrier of Divine Love.

Mary sings a lullaby to us across all these centuries and generations about the way God meets us in our vulnerability, even in our shame and says you matter. You are safe and you matter.

Mary teaches us about self-compassion and inner resonance—about the power we have to upgrade the mother within us who wasn't mothered in all the ways she needed to be either.

Mary sings to us about how much we matter to God—and that God will do great things for us and through us.

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God is here—yearning for us to know the healing possibilities that we carry inside of us. Today, may we wonder together at the Divine Love waiting within each of us—biding its time to be born into this weary and waiting world.

Thanks be to God.