

Sumika Sase (Speaking at women's retreat in Saitama area churches)

“Listening to each other at the time of Corona
– like Mary and Elizabeth”

Luke 1:39-56

Where are you listening to this message? I would like to talk to you as if I were speaking to you. I would like to speak to you as if I were speaking to you, invisible to your eyes. Some of you may be feeling tired from work or caring for others. Some of you may be experiencing loneliness. Others may be experiencing great joy. Corona has isolated us. At this time when it is difficult to gather in church, I would like to talk about loneliness and people who are alone.

Before Corona, we took it for granted that we would come to worship and that people would be there for us in times of pain and joy. Now, it has become the norm for people to spend time apart from each other, and that may be the most dangerous thing of all. I would like to speak to all of you who are invisible, but loved by God. Mary and Elisabeth have chosen to spend this important time of their pregnancy together. For those of us in the midst of the Corona disaster, we can find the key.

A God who forgives and loves me as I am. These may be the days of nurturing myself. Just like raising a child, raising yourself is difficult to do alone. How did Mary and Elisabeth listen to God and raise themselves?

Elisabeth had the affliction of being barren for a long time. In those days, a barren woman was seen as evidence of a lack of God's blessing. Elisabeth and her husband Zacharias were righteous before God, but they were not blessed. On the other hand, one day when Elisabeth was about six months pregnant, Mary became pregnant through a divine message. Considering the background of that time period, it was not a very joyful situation. But she obeyed God to the utmost, saying, "If it is your will, let it be done to me." It was not a safe journey, about 150 kilometers from Nazareth to Judea, but they chose to spend time together. It's tempting to go with someone who can help us make sense of and explore things together. We have the freedom to ask God alone, and we have the freedom to share with others. Mary might have thought that Elisabeth would understand. Elisabeth's blessing on Mary is found in her words. "Most blessed are you, and blessed is the baby! And that the Mother of the Lord would come to me!"

Women are focused on living for today. At such a time when our own needs tend to take a backseat, it is important to listen to each other, as Mary and Elisabeth did. It may be easy to help, but it's not easy to ask for help. Humility is needed. There may be a fear that we may be rejected. Still, there is a great possibility that we will face each other and realize things that we never realized before. Why don't you share a little bit of what's going on inside of you? You don't know yourself as well as you think you do. If you don't stop to think about why you are disappointed, you won't even realize what you are disappointed about. If you don't have someone to listen to your words, you can't even find a clue about it. That's how we are trying our best. Still, why don't we begin to open our souls together to what we need to receive now? God is with us, whether we realize it or not. It is better to think about God and listen to His presence with someone else than alone.

After Mary met Elisabeth, she praised God. Look at yourself with a warm gaze. Who would you like to share your thoughts and feelings with? Don't give up. Start listening to someone else. Don't be lonely or grieving, let yourself grow hopeful.

When the pandemic began, I started worshipping on the phone with a 94-year-old Canadian friend. For two hours every week, we listen to each other, read the Bible, and pray. I know that she loves me and I love her. We say a prayer of praise to God for sending us to each other. At first I called to give encouragement, but now it is my source of energy. My friend said to me, "Sumika, I can imagine Mary and Elisabeth singing "You raise me up". I said. With family and friends by our side, we can experience God's presence here. As you know, both Mary and Elisabeth later became mothers of prisoners on death row. We will continue to have joys and sorrows in our lives. The family of God will be the support that somehow helps us to overcome. Our joys will be doubled and our sorrows will be halved. Why don't you open your heart to God and look for Mary or Elisabeth for you?