

It's a real privilege to be invited to speak to you.

It's a strange group. Some of you I met a few days ago.

Some are my friends and colleagues here in Vancouver.

Some have been close to me at earlier stages in my story,
growing up at Emmanuel Baptist in Saskatoon, going to a CBWC camp,
studying at Regent.

One of you is my father, so that's especially early in my story.

In an alternate reality, another timeline, I might have been a CABF pastor.

In this current timeline, I was too ahead of schedule.

In 2013, when Danice and I were coming out publicly, announcing our intent to marry,
and losing our jobs in CBWC churches (Danice was at this one),

I messaged the newly-named CABF to see if they could scoop us up.

But we could only be CABF pastors if we worked in CABF churches,
and sadly at that point, none existed west of Ontario,
and there weren't resources to support a church plant out here.

We got married, and ended up moving to Toronto to work with Generous Space
in Toronto for a few years.

Then we returned to Vancouver in 2017,

in part because we saw a need for an affirming church here
for folks with evangelical heritage, or who resonated with that structure and worship.

We reached out again to the CABF to see if our brand new church
could come under that banner,
but again, I think we were a bit early.

So we went ahead and planted Open Way Church –
without any official connection to a denomination,
me alongside my other Baptist friend Mark,
thinking maybe eventually we could join the CABF.

To our surprise, as the years passed, the two of us pastors and our wives
were some of the only Baptists in the congregation!

We had Mennonites, Anglicans, Pentecostals, Alliance & United Church folks,
and some who were new to church entirely.

Now we're coming under some broader post-evangelical affirming networks
that fit our more trans-denominational identity.

I feel no bitterness about this –

I love the unexpected diversity of people at my church,

and I'm grateful for the way the churches Danice and I have been part of,
like Emmanuel in Saskatoon, and this church, and Kits church,

have become more welcoming of queer folks,

and I've also loved watching the CABF grow and spread across Canada
in more recent years.

And I'm grateful to hang out with you all this week,

and to add another layer of reflection to this theme of kinship.

Today I want to talk about the relationship between kinship and vulnerability.

And I want to do that while reflecting on the story of Mary and Elizabeth.

I also want to bring their story into conversation with my own story
as a queer woman.

Both queer people and women tend to be more familiar with vulnerability,
as they're often pushed to the margins in a patriarchal and queerphobic society.

I wonder what you grew up learning about vulnerability.

I have grown up in a world that runs from vulnerability.

I've grown up in whiteness, which values perfectionism and rugged individualism,
I've grown up in evangelicalism, which tends to embrace triumphalism
and the spiritual bypassing of pain.

I am immersed in a capitalism that wants me to "live my best life,"
fearing scarcity and warding off insecurity through hoarding resources.

And I've become a pastor, which makes me feel vulnerable
but where I'm expected to show strength as a leader.

I started really thinking about the theme of vulnerability

when my church was doing a series on another vulnerable group –

the disability community, one I don't belong to... at least not yet.

During that series I learned to call myself not just able-bodied,
but "temporarily able-bodied."

Because the truth is that almost all of us will at some point in our lives
depend on the accessible systems that disabled people use regularly.

The disability community prophetically reveals our shared human vulnerability,
and our deep need of kinship and care from each other.

To be clear, I don't believe disabled people exist primarily as inspirations
to encourage able-bodied people like me to embrace our vulnerability.

Neither do I want to imply this about queer people, or women,
or other groups that are marginalized, like people of colour.

None of us have chosen these aspects of our identity,
and for some of us, they're vulnerabilities that are taken advantage of,
turned into oppression.

But when we can listen to each other, like you're doing today,
and learn from each other's experiences,

we can hopefully gain new motivation to work together with the Holy Spirit
to overhaul or overthrow the systems that harm us.

I looked up "vulnerable" in the thesaurus

and was struck by two synonyms that feel relevant to me:

one was "accessible," which calls me back to my disability community learning...
and another was "pregnable."

Which got me thinking about... Mary.

Maybe it won't be especially surprising to you

that I didn't think much about Mary in my Baptist church growing up.

She was one of the most popular parts in the Christmas pageant,
but I didn't really understand the appeal of holding a squirming baby or boring doll.
I had never had much of a maternal clock, and I preferred the magi costumes.
As I grew up and heard a rumour that Catholics prayed to Mary,
and that this was a sign that they were on the wrong track,
like many Protestants,
I learned to keep Mary safely tucked away, to be dusted off at Christmas,
then put back in her box.

I was only slightly more interested in Elizabeth,
since she was the person in scripture who shared my name.
(Though as far as I know, the reason my parents gave me the name
was less about the biblical Elizabeth,
and more about my grandmother Elizabeth.)

I remember when I first took an interest in Mary.
It was Advent of 2012.
Danice and I had been living together as housemates for 7 years at that point,
both working for CBWC churches.
And in that time, we'd both come out to ourselves, and to each other,
but Danice assumed I still held more conservative theology on sexuality,
and I assumed that she loved her job here at Grandview too much to marry me.
Then one night I made a joke about how maybe we could get married
when we were old and retired from our pastoral jobs.

She said – wait – you would actually marry me?
Because if so, I don't want to wait until we're old.
And I said, wait – you would marry me even if it meant losing your job?
Suddenly what started as a joke turned into a serious discussion
about coming out publicly the following year, leaving our churches, and getting married.

It wasn't long after that conversation
that I was in some kind of Advent service
where they invited us to reflect on which character from the Christmas story
we most identified with.
And as I contemplated coming out the following year
and the vulnerability I felt, speaking those words, losing control of the narrative,
enduring potential judgment and rejection and an uncertain future,
to my surprise, I found myself gravitating to Mary.

I want to tell you some of the ways this scene between Mary and Elizabeth
resonated with moments or themes on my own queer journey,
even though I don't believe either of them were necessarily queer.
At times I've called these themes "queer gifts."
Today I want to call them practices of kinship in vulnerability.
Because even though queer people are really forced to experience and practice them,
I want to emphasize that everyone can practice them.

And I'm willing to bet that those of you
who have undergone shifts in your theology or faith
because you've had the honour of knowing queer family members or friends
may recognize similar practices and moments in your own lives.

Let's read the first third of this story, stopping after verse 39,
to give context for why Mary is going to Elizabeth's house

[read 1:26-39]

So we've got Mary, this young teenage girl, maybe 13 or 14,
who has suddenly become vulnerable not only to God, but to community judgment.
At best, she will become the local town scandal.
At worst, she and her child could be exiled, left to beg on the streets,
or she could be stoned for adultery before her child is even born.

Thankfully, the angel's visit to Joseph, which isn't narrated here,
and Joseph's belief in Mary and choice to stay married to her does protect her somewhat.
Still, though, Mary prepares to leave town – the text says she “hurries” –
and travel to her cousin's home in the mountain town of Ein Karem.
The journey, likely taken with a caravan, was at least 120 km –
similar to traveling from Vancouver to Hope on foot –
and you saw the words “Judean highlands” in that last verse –
this journey involved a 1300-foot elevation hike through the hills,
where there would have been significant risk of robbery and assault.

Now it's *possible* Mary's incentive for this arduous journey
is just to ride out the first 3 months of morning sickness
with her also-miraculously-pregnant cousin Elizabeth.

But I think Mary may have had other motivations.
I think she needed someone to help her ride out her vulnerability.
I think she was searching for kinship.
And the angel Gabriel had name-dropped her cousin Elizabeth,
almost like he was hinting that this intergenerational connection
would be a wise thing to rekindle.

Let's read the second part, about what happens when Mary arrives,
which will be our main focus for talking about some practices of vulnerability.

[read 1:40-45]

1st practice - BODY-LISTENING

Most queer journeys begin with a realization,
with a queer person coming out to themselves.

Some of us start listening to our bodies very early in life -
particularly some trans folks –
studies show that awareness of gender identity
can happen in very early childhood,
one more reason we need to believe and support trans kids!

For me, listening & awakening to my attraction to women didn't happen until my early 20s.
I think there were several reasons for this.

I was a perfectionist, like many good firstborn pastor's kids.
So even though I had a sense that I wasn't like my peers in some ways,
I didn't even let myself consciously acknowledge my desires.
We weren't supposed to trust our feelings anyway.
So they were relegated to a "do not disturb" part of my brain.

Besides, as a female, I was socialized to mainly desire to BE desired, by a man.
I didn't have to ask myself who I was drawn to – only who was drawn to me.
Which wasn't many men, since I was wearing cargo pants and men's sweaters.
And hitting youth group at the height of purity culture
meant that I wasn't even shamed for not dating –
I was praised for waiting until "the right guy" came along.

It wasn't until I moved here after my undergrad degree, to study at Regent,
and began falling in love with my housemate Danice,
that I actually had to come to terms with what my body was telling me.
I knew my friendship with Danice would suffer if I didn't.
It was a kinship-based priority that prompted me to finally practice kinship with myself,
listening to my own body, paying attention to my desires, and how I was wired.

Part of my predicament, which I shared with Mary,
was the relative privacy of our experiences.
I was constantly second-guessing whether I was really gay.
Part of me really wanted to be straight and bargained with the other parts of me.

I wonder if this happened to Mary too - The angel met Mary alone.
Did she ever doubt her bodily experience,
wondering whether she'd dreamt up the whole ridiculous angel episode,
at least until Joseph had his own ridiculous angel episode?
I imagine her paying close attention to her body to confirm what happened,
noting the missed periods, the nausea, the swollen breasts.

And again, while listening to your body can be a very private, individual process,
I'm struck by the way Elizabeth's body responds to Mary's body
– or more precisely, the way John's body inside Elizabeth's body
responds to Jesus' body inside Mary's body.
But Elizabeth is also listening –
she feels and interprets the movement inside her body.

As Elizabeth tells it: "as soon as my ears heard your voice,

the baby in my womb leapt for joy.”

She vulnerably shares her own strange embodied experience,
and I’m willing to bet that immediately, Mary felt less alone.

Kinship can ease the vulnerability of listening to our bodies
when our kin validate our embodied experiences,
when they non-judgmentally accompany us
in unpacking what we’re feeling.

I wonder how this vulnerable practice of listening to the wisdom of your body
has shown up in your life,
and whether there are any kin who have helped you,
who have validated your attempts to do so.
Maybe you’ve learned to trust your gut instincts.
Maybe you’ve learned where your body carries trauma.
Maybe you’ve learned what gives your body pleasure. (Dance parties!)
Maybe you’re discovering how to dress and express your gender
in ways that make you feel good,
participating in co-creating your body alongside your Creator.

2nd practice: UNCERTAINTY-WELCOMING

Often for queer people, especially those in evangelical faith communities
the process of listening to our bodies creates some uncertainty,
as we realize that some beliefs and teachings no longer line up with our experience.
For example, after coming out to myself,
I could no longer consider queer people as “other,”
as this class of people outside the church
who chose to be the way they are.

This kicked off a process of deconstruction and research.
I took out every book related to queer theology from the Regent library,
and serendipitously, there were several affirming books there,
thanks to another queer alumnus who donated them to the library,
whom I much later had the pleasure of meeting!
Sometimes we discover our kin after they’ve already helped us.

Research led to discovering that scriptures that seem to reference queer people
aren’t as simple or straightforward as I thought.
Like many other queer Christians, I was left confused
about to what degree my pastors, scriptures, or my experiences were trustworthy.
Even whether God was trustworthy.

I think this may not have been far from what Mary felt on the way to Elizabeth’s place.
Back in verse 29, she was “confused” by her designation as “favored one.”
I’m sure she was even more confused
when she asked “how will this be?” and the answer was:
“The Holy Spirit will come over you

and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.”
Yeah, that really clears things up.

Again, she had no witnesses or corroborating proof
to legitimate or make sense of her unlikely and confusing story.
We could say, “Well, the virgin birth was prophesied by Isaiah.”
but even if Mary had had the ingenuity to draw those parallels,
as a teenage girl, what authority did she have
to convince a rabbi, or even Elizabeth, that she was the chosen virgin?

I wonder if on that long journey, she was rehearsing what to tell Elizabeth,
how to justify that what had happened to her was real,
how to break down and unravel the mystery into something digestible.
But Elizabeth *doesn't even ask* for the story of what happened.
She doesn't require Mary to jump through any hoops of orthodoxy,
or anxiously try to find other possibilities to explain away what happened.

And this could be because Elizabeth herself
has just had an unbelievable, inexplicable pregnancy of her own.
So she meets Mary in the midst of both of their unanswered questions,
and in this space of kinship in vulnerability,
we see confusion transformed into wonder and awe.
Together they're able to welcome that which is uncertain,
unprovable - the mysterious expansiveness of God.
The safety to do so comes because of their belonging to each other,
no matter what they end up believing,
or how many other people end up believing them.

When we're in those vulnerable spaces of swirling doubt and confusion,
where our faith and our theology are shifting,
it can make all the difference to find people willing to walk next to us,
without rushing us through it, or setting limits
around where our exploration can take us, where we're allowed to land,
Because the Word of God is not a dead book,
but a person who is still alive,
and questions are not the end, but the beginning of faith,
and perfect interpretations were never a prerequisite
for being part of the kingdom of God.

Have you had any Elizabeths who have done that in your life?
Consider thanking them. Speaking of which...
Jeremy Keay, almost a decade ago,
I felt like I needed to finally read and engage with
a certain very thick book of non-affirming theology,
and you told me I shouldn't have to endure that on my own.
You read that book alongside me
and we swapped all our snarky rebuttals in a Google doc,
and you made it so much safer for me to wrestle with something

that could have left me in a tricky place emotionally.
Thank you for that. (Gotta practice what I preach.)

3rd practice - TRUTH-TELLING

Even though “coming out” is often framed as a singular event for queer people,
it’s really an ongoing process, a constant reality.

Believe it or not, there are people I meet out there who see this haircut
and DON’T immediately clock me as queer.

So when I’m meeting new people, especially in mixed Christian gatherings,
I’m always weighing the risks against the benefits,
deciding whether or not I’ll mention the fact that I have a wife,
and whether I have energy for the conversations that may follow.

I fully believe that telling the vulnerable truth about ourselves
is offering someone a beautiful gift of trust.

And thankfully vast majority of MY kin have received my gift of truth-telling
with love and gratitude, including my dad, who’s here.

But of course, such disclosures are not always received as gifts.

The word “vulnerable” comes from the Latin word for “wound.”

Vulnerability leaves us open to being wounded.

Some of you likely also have stories of taking risks of vulnerability only to be wounded,
even by people you would call kin.

Kinship can alleviate vulnerability,
but kinship can also intensify vulnerability.

In order to survive this pain of wounding,
we might be tempted to return violence for violence,
or we might numb and armor ourselves - putting up our guard,
never wanting to leave ourselves unprotected again.

Understandable strategies in the short-term,
but over time, they end up damaging and diminishing us and others.

The hard truth is that vulnerability is the avenue for wounding
but it is also the only avenue for our healing.

After taking the time we need to rebuild trust,
we need to open ourselves up again,
to again making ourselves accessible to God and to community
to allow our healing to happen,
whether healing looks like physical or emotional healing,
or whether it looks like restoration to kinship, to community.

I don’t really know what this truth-telling looked like in Mary’s situation.

How did people react when she told them she carried the son of God?

Luke doesn’t even tell us how Joseph reacted – that’s in Matthew’s version.

But I’m willing to bet
that Mary desperately needed this time with Elizabeth

to prepare her for those conversations,
to ground her and remind her of her belovedness and her dignity
before she returned to Nazareth,
where the swelling belly of this unwed mother
would inspire much pointing, whispering, and scowling.

So we have body-listening, uncertainty-welcoming, truth-telling,
and now, a fourth practice that weaves through all the others:

4th practice - SHAME-BUSTING

During 2013, my big year of coming out,
I had a practice of waking up early each morning,
going outside, walking one block from my house
to a spot where a labyrinth that was painted on the concrete.
Each morning I would walk the labyrinth, and when I reached the center,
I whispered, "I am the beloved child of God,
and nothing anyone says to me today can separate me from God's love."
This was how I tried to counteract the sense of shame
at seeing shock or disappointment on faces when I came out.

And as helpful as that personal spiritual practice was for me,
to ground myself and remind myself of who I was,
it was ten times more helpful
when another person reminded me who I was.
When I heard my belovedness from the mouth of a loved one, from kin.
Shame makes us want to isolate,
but if we take the risk of opening up and connecting,
our fellow humans can instantly banish our shame.

Elizabeth could empathize with the stigma Mary carried.
For decades, Elizabeth had been stigmatized
for being unable to have children – this made her less of a woman in her culture.
(Actually my theory is that it was Zechariah who was impotent,
but in those days, it was always blamed on the "barren woman").

The irony in this interweaving of Mary & Elizabeth's stories
is that while Mary's miraculous pregnancy brought her public disgrace,
Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy REMOVED her public disgrace –
in the verse that directly precedes this passage, verse 25,
Elizabeth says, "The Lord has shown his favor to me
by removing my disgrace among other people."

Despite the fact Elizabeth can relate with Mary around public disgrace,
Elizabeth is also a very privileged person –
she's the wife of a priest in Jerusalem, she's known as a righteous woman,
and having her social standing increased by this long-awaited pregnancy
may have made her hesitant to risk her reputation

by showing hospitality to an unwed pregnant teen cousin from a hick town.
And Mary probably knew this.

I imagine Mary finally arriving at Elizabeth's door after this long journey,
taking a deep breath, tentatively peeking in and saying hello...
bracing herself to be politely declined, sent right back on the road.

But instead, Elizabeth looks at her, and she shouts a blessing over her!
In this version, it says Elizabeth "blurts it out" in a "loud voice"
Have you ever had someone blurt out a loud blessing over you?
This blessing from an older to a younger generation is so powerful.
Elizabeth is the first to name Mary as the mother of God.

What Elizabeth gives Mary is the gift of pride,
which is very important to the queer community.
This is not the sinful kind of pride, that puffs up our ego,
but the healthy kind, the kind that is the opposite of shame.
It involves believing that our worth does not depend on the approval of others
but on the fact that we are made in the image of our Creator.
This gives us inestimable worth, dignity, and value.

Again, queer Christians spend much of our lives just asking to be tolerated,
and we sometimes assume we need to be begging for crumbs from God, too.
This is why we need pride – not just a parade, not just a month, but an outlook
that promotes unabashed celebration, joy, and resilience in who we are.

For me, pride is about fighting shame and fear
with the truth that God doesn't just tolerate me,
doesn't just love me because God has to love everyone –
but that God actually likes me, not in spite of my queerness, but because of it,
because it showcases the diversity in God's creation.
It's about God choosing and blessing the ones who are at the edges,
the rejects, the underdogs, the weirdos –
precisely because they're weird,
because they show God's upside-down, queer power.

Pride is not a private thing – it's a community affair –
it's about your kin reminding you that you're loved.
And you can give and receive it even if you're straight and cisgender.

There's this poem by Galway Kinney called St. Francis and the Sow,
where Kinney imagines Saint Francis blessing a pig,
Francis putting his hand on the pig's forehead,
saying, "sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness... until it flowers again from within."
I've made that a bit of a life focus for myself.
To reteach other people and creatures their loveliness
and sit back and watch them burst into bloom.

Who are the kin in your life
who have busted through your shame and fear
and helped you recover pride in your belovedness?
Who has retaught you your loveliness?
Whom are you reteaching their loveliness?

5th practice - PROPHETIC SONG-SINGING

Sometimes vulnerability is exactly what leads to creativity.

Ocean Vuong, a queer poet, wrote:

“Being queer saved my life. Often we see queerness as deprivation.

But when I look at my life,

I saw that queerness demanded an alternative innovation from me.

I had to make alternative routes; it made me curious;

it made me ask, “is this enough for me?”

Ocean’s quote also makes me think about the octopus.

I know this feels like a weird trajectory,

but Leah’s talk yesterday about kinship and creation was amazing,

and I want to riff off it – so stay with me here...

The cephalopods, the bigger family that includes octopi,

evolved very slowly for millions of years,

because they had a hard protective shell around them.

The thing about **shells** is that they tend to limit evolution –

for example, turtles have barely changed in millions of years,

not that we hold that against them!

But 140 million years ago, this shell-less cephalopod we now call an octopus
branched off the main evolutionary line with a soft, defenseless body.

To survive without their usual armor,

octopi had to develop radical innovations,

like camouflage, huge eyes, and strong, flexible arms.

Creativity borne from vulnerability,

from refusing to put up a shell and guard yourself,

which is its own kind of beautiful fierceness.

So I want to spend a bit of time with Mary’s creative act –

her beautifully fierce song, known as the Magnificat.

This song is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called

“the most passionate, the wildest, the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung.”

Let’s read it together.

[Luke 1:47-56]

So because Mary’s risky vulnerability

is cocooned with the blessing and care of her cousin,
Mary's prophetic creative song can emerge.

In my mind, Elizabeth's blessing is the key that unlocks this song in Mary.

Way back in verse 28 we have the angel Gabriel saying to Mary,
"Rejoice, favored one! God has honored you."

But again, sometimes even when God and angels say these things to us,
they don't sink in until we hear them from flesh and blood kin.

So in verse 42, Elizabeth says, "God has blessed you above all women."

And finally, it's dawning on Mary. It's becoming real.

Until in verse 28, Mary is able to sing,

"From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored,"
like she's finally internalized it a true,
confirming it with her own voice and agency.

Would Mary have been able to do that

without Elizabeth shouting out a blessing over her?

Would Mary have even sung this song at all,
had her kin not been there to listen to it?

She looks at her elderly cousin, and sings,

"from one generation to the next, God shows mercy."

This is what has just been happening between her and Elizabeth.

In the song, Mary doesn't downplay her lowly position –

she emphasizes it, she almost brags about her low status,

because it showcases the work of God,

who chooses the people the world considers lowly to upset the powerful.

She names what God has always been like, what God has always done,

and spells out how God is going to show up,

speaking about the future in past and present tense,

confidently braiding together all of time.

In the words of Melissa Florer-Bixler,

"The reign of God begins in the body of Mary.

The first announcement of what the kingdom looks like,

what will happen, who it will topple –

it begins here with Mary's song.

She is the first to proclaim the gospel."

Notice that there's no metaphysical theology of the incarnation in this song.

No reflections on how the baby in her womb is both divine and human.

No musings on Jesus' miraculous conception.

She sings instead about politics. Economics. Which of course are just as theological!

She sings of the end of Rome's crushing rule,

boldly naming coercive power and excessive wealth

as enemies of the reign of God

that will be overturned in a dramatic reversal.

when God inverts power structures and economies in favour of the oppressed.

Mary and Elizabeth are the first people to understand this secret:
that their God was, like them, embracing vulnerability and neediness.
They are marveling at how their God is willing
to be attached to the uterine wall of a rural teenage girl,
completely dependent on her body for nourishment,
a God protected not by a hard shell, only by amniotic fluid for 9 months,
a God risking the process of childbirth, before modern medicine (!),
a baby God who cannot even hold up his head
when threatened by a king who wanted him dead.

I wonder if Mary and Elizabeth are even making the guess
that this Messiah is going to bring transformation
not through triumphant violence,
but by becoming an embodied, vulnerable creature.
Because even when one party is divine and one is human,
love always requires mutual vulnerability.
Immanuel, God with us, is love drawing near.
Love putting Themselves in need of their creation.
Love unleashing creative prophetic potential through kinship.

This song Mary composes is considered so radical
that at least three times in recent history,
singing or reciting it has been banned by governments and militaries:
during the British rule of India,
in the 1980s in Guatemala, and during the Dirty War in Argentina
after Las Madres posterized the capital plaza with the words of the Magnificat
to protest their 30,000 missing family members.

In so many times and places,
Mary's God shows mercy to those whose vulnerability has been abused.
God will make sure they are lifted and filled with good things.
Even if they feel insignificant and small, like Mary,
they are valuable to God, and their song will be heard.

And I believe Mary's song shows the mercy of God for the rich and overfed too.
It might not feel that way at first,
but being brought down from power, experiencing emptiness –
this is how those of us with power get in touch with our human vulnerability
and recognize that we really do need each other and God.

Of course, our identities are complex and intersectional.
In some aspects of my life, I'm the underdog.
I'm the one whose song needs unleashing,
who needs to claim the blessing and power of God.
And in other situations, I'm the one with more power.
I'm the rich one that will be sent away empty, the mighty cast down.

In those situations, I'm invited to be like my namesake, Elizabeth,
to treat the so-called lowly with honor, to believe their stories,
and to learn when to be silent
and make room to hear the song that needs singing.

Two women, from two generations, two thousand years ago,
risking vulnerability, acknowledging their need of each other,
practicing body-listening, uncertainty-welcoming,
truth-telling, shame-busting, prophetic song-singing,
and eventually, as I describe my final practice,
tent-widening.

final practice - TENT-WIDENING

After Elizabeth listens to Mary's powerful song,
she offers Mary one more gift: the gift of sanctuary, three months of hospitality,
Even though Elizabeth is in her old age and 6 months pregnant,
she chooses to widen her tent,
to welcome Mary into her home, an intimate and vulnerable space,
offering Mary shelter from gossip and ostracism.
Elizabeth provides refuge for a teenage member of her extended family.

This makes me think of those who provide similar refuge to queer teenagers.
I'm sure some of you have heard the awful statistic
that over 40% of homeless youth are LGBTQ+,
and the number one reason those youth give for their homelessness
is the lack of family acceptance,
and the number one reason their families don't accept them
is because their churches tell them not to.

When Danice and I were working with Generous Space in Toronto,
there were youth homeless shelters calling us up
saying, "We don't just want to do compassion work and house these teens,
we want to do prevention work, to address the root cause,
but we have no idea how to talk to these religious families.
We don't understand why they're kicking out their kids."

So many of you are already doing this prevention work,
I see you loving your own queer children, exactly as they are.
I see you loving the kids in your youth group, exactly as they are.
Making intentional space for them, saving seats for them at the table.
You are practicing tent-widening, or as some queer folks might label it,
you are becoming their chosen family.

Chosen family could include fellow queer folks
as well as straight and cisgender allies,
who become our adopted elders and siblings and children.

Queer communities seek out chosen family because we need each other to survive.

And yet we end up realizing that this parallels our place in the family of God.

God's family is an adoptive family, not of blood, but of choosing.

This is most evident in the New Testament, with the ragtag chosen family of disciples,
and then the early church, which grew not primarily through childbirth,
but through Gentiles being grafted into the sacred community.

The early church was one big chosen family, supporting and needing each other.

Yet even in the Old Testament, we see God widening the tent,
adopting people like Naaman and Ruth and Rahab.

My favourite example of God's hospitality is the story of eunuchs throughout scripture.

These castrated men could not bear children, could not have families of their own.

They were the primary sexual and gender minorities of their time.

And despite being banned from the temple in Deuteronomy,

there's this thread of increasing inclusion for eunuchs in scripture,

with Isaiah prophesying that they will be welcomed back in,

given a name and a future, despite having no children or heirs,

then with Jesus honoring them by counting himself as a eunuch in Matthew 19,

until finally, Philip baptizes an Ethiopian eunuch - one of the first converts in Acts.

This is the radical hospitality and widening tent of the Spirit.

Of course, the Spirit also widens our tents

through biological children, through blood family.

Mary and Elizabeth are both about to welcome new children into the world.

And they will teach those children many things.

Melissa Florer Bixler writes that

"Jesus learned how the reign of God would look from his mother,

I imagine her singing her Magnificat to him each night as a lullaby.

The turning of tables in the temple, the woe to the righteous,

the call to the rich young man to sell all he has –

this is prophesied at the beginning and taught to Jesus as he grows.

Mary is the first priest, the first to offer Jesus' body to the world.

She nurtures that body, teaches him, feeds him from her breast,

and tells him the story of Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt."

Elizabeth's child will baptize Mary's child.

Jesus will later ask Mary if he can bring a bunch of new friends home for dinner,

widening her tents even further,

introducing her to a new community of disciples.

And eventually, from the cross, Jesus creates chosen family for Mary,

saying, "woman, here is your son."

And now, centuries later, Mary has gained millions more children.

So many people around the world feel kinship with Mary, calling her mother.

Where I once criticized people who pray to Mary,

now I understand that she presents to them

the most accessible and compassionate path

to a God who was presented to them, usually by colonizers,
as distant and untouchable.

You can find icons of Mary in the skin colour and clothing of thousands of cultures.

I learned about the many Black Madonnas that exist across Europe
from Christena Cleveland, who wrote the incredible book God is a Black Woman.

From Melissa Florer Bixler I learned
that in the Ecclesial Base Communities of South America,
Mary is the *companera de camino*, friend on the road,
sister, mother of the oppressed and the worthless.

I also saw that just this past Saturday, Palestinian Christians celebrated
their 98th annual feast of Mary, Queen of Palestine,
and prayed that she might watch over those who suffer,
those who flee bombardment, or those who have lost family in the genocide.

So many humans have come to Mary in their deepest vulnerability,
because she feels like their kin.

Mary bears God to all peoples.

In a sense, she is always widening God's tent to welcome them in.

CONCLUSION

The CABF is a tent that is widening,
tentposts stretching to welcome churches and pastors on both coasts,
providing kinship and sanctuary to more and more people
who want to practice Baptist freedoms,
especially, these days, the freedom to welcome queer people like me,
and to honour the gifts they bring.
We'll have a chance in a moment to talk about this CABF kinship,
and both the gifts and challenges of the inherent vulnerability this brings.

But I want to close by inviting you to think about this
also in the context of your personal experience.

I wonder if, you've felt vulnerable at all over the course of this conference. (pause)

Or, perhaps, over this last season of your life. (pause)

Maybe it's been a vulnerability you've carried over your whole life.

What part of that vulnerability do you feel invited to lean into?

What part of it connects to Jesus' own incarnational vulnerability?

Where do you hear the invitation to stop numbing and armoring yourself
and step into the octopus creativity
and Christlike empathy for your kin that vulnerability can foster?

And what part of your vulnerability is exacerbated by oppression
and longs for justice and liberation?

For me, there's a part of me that *knows* that being a queer woman

gives me gifts that are ideal for pastoring.

It's taught me to listen to my body and to give others permission to do the same.

To embrace mystery and uncertainty.

To tell the truth, as I'm trying to do right now, God help me.

To notice when other people carry shame that I can diffuse.

Being a queer pastor lets me practice a fresh kind of prophetic creativity,
a wide-tent kind of mentality.

But there's still a part of me that whispers and repeats this lie
that straight men are always going to be better pastors.

They're what people expect, what people want me to be more like.

More confident, more authoritative, self-assured, visionary.

This is my internalized homophobia and misogyny, of course.

This is the part that needs continual liberation.

Even while working on this talk,

that internalized oppression creeps back, looking like perfectionism again,

as though I need to try to make this extra good to measure up

and compensate for some liability that comes from being a queer woman.

This part whispers, "Are you maybe talking TOO much about queerness?"

Will they take you seriously? Or domesticate you, like they did Mary,

thinking, sure, she can talk about female things, queer things,

but she's not very relatable to the "average person."

Again, I can refute that voice, I can push back, especially with help from kin.

but because of the messages I still get from the larger church and world,

liberation from that voice is a continual process.

It helps to speak these things out loud to you,

to receive the gift of your kinship in the midst of my own vulnerability this week,

to remind myself that we're all muddling our way through –

even the straight men, am I right, straight men?

I know you want to help as Christ liberate me.

I want to be part of your liberation too. Thank God for this wide tent.

This is my prayer for myself this season –

that I would become a pastor who leans into her awkwardness and uncertainty,

who learns to love her own vulnerability.

That this would create more safety for my church to risk vulnerability

and practice needing and caring for each other,

following our vulnerable Messiah through the unavoidable pain

of picking up our cross and carrying it into mutual healing and liberation.

I am learning my main job as a pastor, and really, our main job as humans
is to believe each other's stories of how God is showing up.

To help one another welcome uncertainty and tell the truth.

And to bless each other. Maybe even with shouting.

For me to reteach you your loveliness. For you to reteach me mine.

To speak our deep and unshakeable beauty and worth.

And then we all get to step back and witness first-hand
the way we each creatively imagine and express the vision
of what the world looks like when caught up in God's justice and mercy.
To hear and amplify one another's defiant, dangerous, vulnerable songs.
If I can do that, if we can do that together, my Baptist kin,
then I think we can consider ourselves very highly favored.

May it be so. Amen.