

Luke 1:39-55
Fourth Sunday of Advent
St Mark – December 19, 2021
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The meeting

On this, the last Sunday in Advent we are not looking toward the next coming of Jesus. Our focus isn't even on his first time on earth.

Today we dwell on Mary and her kinswoman, Elizabeth. Two women who are integral to the story of our own salvation; our salvation from eternal death and condemnation. It is through these two women that Jesus, the Messiah and John, the Baptist were born.

Elizabeth was an old woman at this time in her life. She and her husband, Zachariah, had prayed for a child for decades and Elizabeth's failure in this regard was the source of great sadness for both of them. And now she found herself carrying a child, carrying a child when she held no expectation of being freed from her shame. Her shame at being barren.

Mary was a young woman, barely a woman at all, but a maid. Engaged to Joseph when the angel came. She may well have expected judgment and rejection from her not-quite-yet husband, but trusted God and willingly took on the role for which she was chosen.

Both women had reason to fear. Their culture rejoiced at the prospect of a child, but only when all the rules were followed and it would be assumed that an unmarried pregnant woman had not followed all the rules.

Childbirth was dangerous business from the standpoint of the criticism that might come from those around them and the obvious risk and fear of death that could accompany any birth at that time.

Travel was also dangerous and was always an exhausting affair in that day, but Mary travels to see Elizabeth and she travels for several days as she makes the journey of more than 100 miles.

Mary goes to Elizabeth and when she called out in greeting to her it was John, still in his mother's womb, who leaped for joy. His mother was filled with the Holy Spirit and she knew that Mary was greatly blessed. Blessed not only by the child she carried, but by the trust and faith she has shown by her humble willingness to take on the role God has given her.

Mary's visit brought with it several blessings. It took her away from her home, a small town where tongues had already started to wag as neighbors learned that this yet-to-be-married, devout Jewish girl was pregnant. Her visit also allowed Mary to confirm what the angel told her about Elizabeth carrying a child, Elizabeth, her elderly kinswoman. Mary would have been concerned for Elizabeth's health and this visit would also help assure her that Elizabeth was well.

The greatest blessing of this visit may have been for these two women to share with each other their extraordinary experience of being touched by the Holy Spirit of God. They alone held this distinction in this way and were able to finally share their feelings of excitement, doubt, wonder, anticipation, and fear with someone who felt the same. They were able to share their feelings of awe as God was at work in each of them. This visit would have been comforting beyond measure to both of them.

Elizabeth immediately recognized that she was in the presence of the mother of the long awaited Lord. She was filled with the Holy Spirit as she proclaimed Mary to be the most blessed among women, more blessed than even she.

And then we hear Mary express her feelings about what has and is happening to her in The Magnificat.

What Mary says next,

"My soul magnifies the Lord..." and the following verses

is referred to in our day as The Magnificat, because Magnificat is the Latin word that translates as "My soul magnifies".

She knows full well who her yet-to-be-born son is and what place he holds in God's plan. She speaks with full recognition that she is uniquely blessed and that she and this great blessing will be known by all generations to come. She confirms that all this has been foretold by the prophets.

Mary and Elizabeth had much to share, much to discuss and their conversation must have gone on for days. Their visit went on for three months.

It is only Luke who records this stirring story of Mary, Elizabeth, John, and Jesus and his telling of this story is a gift. So much of what we read throughout the gospels is instructive, telling us how to behave, how to live our lives. There are certainly lessons to be learned in this story, but more than those lessons, today I am drawn to the simple beauty of these two women's encounters with the Holy.

The beauty of these women saying “yes” when there were so many reasons to say “no”.

I am drawn to their strength as they trust in God and push all the fears and doubts conjured up and hurled at them by Satan himself. They push all of it away as they say “yes”.

Their willingness to enter this river of events that will carry each of them to places they can’t even imagine is both puzzling and inspiring.

Satan is strong. The Three in One, God, is stronger.

Both women know the scriptures well and would have already pondered some of what was ahead for the babes they carried. Many a mother-to-be has wondered at what the future holds for the babe that grows inside her.

These two women were schooled in the prophecies of old and although those prophecies were often misunderstood, parts of them were quite clear.

The Psalms are filled with talk of the Messiah’s sacrifice, of his torture, and murder. They speak of his torment. They speak of his place with God and his dedication to the role he has taken on in the life unfolding on earth.

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Ruth, and both 1st and 2nd Samuel include the telling of the joy brought by the coming Messiah. They tell of his purpose and they tell of his saving grace. The list of Old Testament references doesn’t end with Samuel, it continues and these two women were well acquainted with the scriptures.

Mary learns more about her son 40 days after his birth when at the temple they meet Simeon and then Anna. First Simeon and then Anna speak to Mary and Joseph of the great things to be done by their son. Both praise God and speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

These glorious and hope-filled recognitions tell of the place this precious babe holds for the whole world. They continue to tell the story already started in the scriptures of old.

But it is Simeon who tells of the pain to come when he looks to Mary and says, “and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” For with the extraordinary joy comes torment as well.

Throughout Jesus’ life his actions are not what the scholars of the day expected and his birth to humble parents would surprise many as well. But Jesus came to be one of us. He came and he lived without pretense. He was set apart by his

actions, how he lived his life, and it was the actions he took on behalf of others that set him apart. And all the while he remained one of us. Experiencing joys and sorrow just as we do today. He came to save us and along the way he showed us that we too can be forgiven and understood.

The condemnation that Mary experienced, the shame of Elizabeth, the torture on the cross, the experiences of our lives that have brought pain and humiliation, Jesus heals it all. He sees past the self we show to the world and welcomes us home. To the home he has prepared for all who follow him.

May we be the welcoming smile of Jesus to those who do not yet know his love, his sacrifice, his gift to the world. May we take a deep breath and relax in his peace.

May we be like Elizabeth and Mary and say “yes” to God. Trusting that the salvation he offers is ours for the taking. Trusting that God’s will comes with the Light of Christ perpetually shining upon us.