

Mary Visits Elizabeth
Luke 1:39-55
Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year C December 22, 2024
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Good morning, friends, and welcome to worship! In just a few days, we'll celebrate the birth of Jesus. I hope that you have been able to find time to spiritually prepare for him, even as you get ready to celebrate with family and friends.

The Fourth Sunday of Advent spotlights Mary. In the first section of today's Gospel reading from Luke 1:39-45, we witness a joyous meeting between the newly-pregnant Mary and her kinswoman Elizabeth. Blessedness just oozes out of this encounter!

But before we get to that visit, let's back up a bit in the narrative to see what has already happened. In Luke 1:5-25, the birth of John is foretold. This news amazes Zechariah, a priest and the husband of Elizabeth, because they are both elderly and have had no other children. Yet, a child will be born to them, as we will see happen in Luke 1:57-66.

After we learn of John's impending birth, the angel Gabriel visits Mary to announce to her that she has been chosen to be the mother of the Son of God (1:26-38). This teenage peasant girl, who is engaged but not yet married, quickly assents. She is "the servant of the Lord," despite the as yet unknown hardships that may come with being so young and unmarried in a culture where she would bring shame upon herself, her family, and Joseph. Since she is willing to answer God's call, the Holy Spirit "overshadows" her and soon she is with child.

So far, Luke has provided his readers with two different storylines: one with John and his parents, and one with Mary, Gabriel, and the astonishing news he brings. In verses 39-45 the two threads become entwined as Mary hastily sets off to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth. We're told that she is headed for Judean hill country. Rev. Russel Saltzman calculates that Mary probably had to travel four-and-a-half days from her home in Nazareth to reach Elizabeth, who likely lived in the village of Ein Karem, some 90 miles away.

Having taught in a public school in Baltimore comprised only of teenage mothers, I find it challenging to imagine one of my thirteen-year-old students (yes, I did have some!) setting off alone on foot to cover rugged terrain. Travel would have been extremely dangerous, and Mary may have often experienced morning sickness and fatigue, with nowhere to stop and be refreshed. She went anyway and apparently made it to Elizabeth's home without incident. I do admire her resourcefulness, but I also have to wonder why she felt it was so important to take such risks to see Elizabeth.

Perhaps she had an urgent need to tell Elizabeth her surprising news. Maybe she wanted to encourage the elderly Elizabeth, who had been the subject of scorn by her peers for so long due to her inability to have children. Perhaps she felt that she needed to help take care of Elizabeth, since Gabriel told her that she was six months into her pregnancy. If that's the case, it would seem that Mary would have stayed until after John was born, but we're told in verse 56 that Mary returned home after about three months. In verse 57 we hear news of John's birth, so it seems that Mary left just before John's birth.

There could have been several reasons for her visit, but I have to wonder if Mary wanted to learn more from the devout Elizabeth about who God is and how God works. Luke tells us in 1:5-6 that she is married to a priest, that she herself is a descendent of the priest Aaron, that

she is a righteous woman and a faithful follower of the covenantal laws. She and Zechariah are both past their prime, having never had children. Given the exemplary descriptions of both, we would not expect her to be out of favor with God, which was the usual explanation for infertility. God seems to have had other plans for this couple.

Having made the arduous journey to the “house of Zechariah” (1:40), Mary’s kinswoman Elizabeth greets her. The angel has already referred to Elizabeth as Mary’s “relative” (1:36). Although the King James Version uses the more precise word “cousin,” their relationship, and whether it is by blood or by marriage, is unclear. How well these two, who were years apart in age and far apart geographically, actually knew one another is also uncertain. What is clear is that these two women are delighted to see one another!

Mary’s words are not recorded, but when Elizabeth hears her greeting, the unborn John “leaped in her womb” (1:41). Just a normal fetal response? Well, maybe, but when an angel had appeared in the Temple to tell Zechariah that Elizabeth would bear a son, he was also told, “even before his birth [John] will be filled with the Holy Spirit” (1:15). So, the unborn John, who is already Spirit-filled, responds to Mary and her unborn son. Moreover, Elizabeth too is now said to be “filled with the Holy Spirit” (1:41) as she blesses both Mary and Jesus.

What are we to make of all of this? How did Elizabeth know about Mary’s condition? Mary had not posted a sonogram on Facebook. Nor had she called ahead to let Elizabeth know of Gabriel’s visit. The only way that Elizabeth could be privy to this incredible news is that the Holy Spirit had given her the gift of wisdom.

We can surmise that Elizabeth didn’t just pull the idea of a Holy Child, Son of the Most High, out of a hat. Note in verse 45 that she recognizes that Mary believes that what she has been told will indeed be fulfilled. Again, we see great spiritual insight and wisdom in Elizabeth’s prophetic words.

And we also see blessings bestowed on Mary and her unborn child. What does it mean to be blessed? We might think immediately of “saying the blessing” or “grace” before we eat, and that is surely an appropriate use of the word. However, from another perspective, “blessing” is a prayer asking for God’s protection and favor. More specifically in verse 42, the Greek word, which is used twice, means “favored of God.” Recall that when Gabriel came to Mary, he greeted her as “favored one” (1:28). In verse 45, Elizabeth again refers to Mary as “blessed” because she believed that what God had spoken to her would be completed or fulfilled. Here, though, the Greek word means “happy.” Here, we think of Mary’s emotional state, at least as Elizabeth sees it.

Thus far, we’ve heard Elizabeth speak and have been told that John had responded in her womb to Mary’s presence. But we’ve not heard a peep out of Mary herself. That changes in verses 46-55 where she sings what is often called by the opening of this passage in Latin, *Magnificat*, which means “my soul magnifies the Lord.” This exquisite poetry was likely not written by an illiterate middle-high student. It has strong echoes of Hannah’s prayer of thanksgiving (1 Samuel 2:1-10). But regardless of who wrote the *Magnificat*, this song expresses great reversals that will come about because of Jesus’ birth.

Mary begins by praising God for the favor that has been bestowed upon her. She is, after all, a peasant girl with no family status, wealth, or power. Despite her low estate, she sings that “all generations will call [her] blessed” (1:48). Why? Mary reports that God has done great things for her. Her social and financial standings have certainly not improved after Gabriel’s

visit, but she is “happy” because God has chosen her to be the mother of the Holy Child. I wonder if any of us can really imagine how Mary is feeling or what she is thinking of her own life at this time.

Note, though, that Mary is not just “blessed” for her own sake. She perceives divine mercy to be available to all who give honor and reverence to God, down through the generations. The merciful God of verse 50 stands in contrast to the warrior God depicted in verse 51-52. Those who have wielded earthly power will be brought low, while those like Mary who are on society’s lowest rung will be lifted up. Moreover, the rich who have had the benefit of good things will now be empty-handed, while those who have been hungry will be filled. Verse 53 reminds me of the story of the poor man who sat at the gate of a rich man’s estate, begging for crumbs, while dogs licked sores on his body. When both men died, their fortunes were reversed as the well-fed, smartly dressed rich man was being tormented in the afterlife, while the poor man, known as Lazarus, was with Abraham (Luke 16:19-31). This is the kind of reversal that Mary foretells in her song. She also points out that God is a promise-keeper who has helped—and will continue to help—Israel (1:54-55). She refers both to herself (1:48) and to the people of Israel (1:54) as God’s servant.

Today’s reading from Luke 1 truly touches our hearts and prompts us to praise God. It tells us about Elizabeth, Mary, and their unborn sons. But this is not one of those Bible passages, such as the parable of the good Samaritan, that we can get into and say, “how can I do the same thing?” These particular events are unrepeatable. So how can we respond?

For me, the key to bringing this story into our lives is the acknowledgement by both Elizabeth and Mary that Mary has been blessed. God has worked in her life in ways that stretch far beyond her time and place. “All generations” (1:48) will not only call her “blessed, but also will be deeply affected by Mary’s son.

We, too, have been blessed, friends, though sometimes we need to view our lives from a different angle to see those blessings. We can say and do things that bless others, that convey to them the knowledge that they are known, loved, and cared for by God. Let’s face it: We all need to be blessed! Blessings put a smile on our faces and a spring in our step. So, if blessing means that much to us, imagine how much it means to other people.

Who can you bless this week? Perhaps you will hear good news, as Elizabeth did, and offer blessings to the one whose life is being transformed. Perhaps you will recognize that blessing people has the power to change your attitude and possibly the lives of those you bless. And maybe when you stop to count your own blessings, you’ll realize how our gracious, loving God has favored you! Perhaps two Bible verses will spark your thinking about what God has already done in your life, not what he *will do*, but what he *has already done*

Only fear the Lord and serve him faithfully with all your heart, for consider what great things he has done for you (1 Samuel 12:14).

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Give thanks. As you do, blessings will become a way of life in your own heart. Once you’ve become keenly aware of your own blessings, consider how you might bless someone else by using one or more of these suggestions. See what other ideas you can come up with.

- Spend time listening to someone.

- Prepare and deliver a meal. If the person lives alone, plan to eat with them.
- Invite someone to church, a Bible study, or prayer group.
- Offer to help them clean.
- Offer to do some gardening or lawn mowing.
- Send a note of appreciation for something they have done.
- Send them a card of encouragement if times have been challenging.
- Tell them in person how much they mean to you.
- Treat them to a meal.
- Tell them what God is doing in your life.

Perhaps we find it easy to give thanks for blessings when life is going well, but the refrain of the old hymn, "Count Your Blessings," reminds us that when we're "tempest tossed" and "discouraged" to "Count your blessings, name them one by one; Count your many blessings, see what God hath done."

There are certainly many blessings to be counted in today's Scripture reading. Good news abounds! The lives of two Jewish women are being upended as elderly Elizabeth who has been infertile is now being blessed with a son. The child will grow to the man who will bless Israel by calling them to repentance in preparation for the arrival of the Lord Jesus. In a similar vein, Mary is blessed because she had been chosen to be the mother of the Son of God. Both women are prophets in their own right as they confirm what God is doing in each of their lives.

Where do you see good news in your family, community, nation, or world? How are you experiencing good news in your own life? Perhaps there is a reversal of fortune in your life, one that you just can't wait to tell others about. Offer thanks and praise for answered prayers. Share the good news that God will soon be with us as Emmanuel.

Love, Nan