

The Fourth Sunday of Advent C 2024
December 22, 2024
Luke 1:39-55
(Sermon by the Reverend Michelle Manicke)

The archangel Gabriel has just delivered his unlikely invitation, and Mary's "yes" is still hanging in the air when suddenly Gabriel vanishes! Poof! Just like that!... Mary blinks, and in that blink of an eye everything is changed. She opens her eyes and sees she's all alone...except for the mysterious new life growing unseen within her. In that moment, Mary feels the silence pressing in on her and the panic beginning to rise within her.... But in that very same moment she also senses a nudging deep within her: SOMEONE is sending her a message—a message that she needs to go visit her kinswoman, Elizabeth. "Yes! That's what I need to do," Mary says to herself. "I need to go see Elizabeth!... If what the angel says about her is true, then she's the only one who'll understand and believe my strange story. Besides, if I am pregnant out of wedlock—and I believe I am!—then I need to get out of town, away from prying eyes and gossiping lips. I need time to think about what to say to Joseph and the rest of my family. And I'll be safe with Elizabeth, because she's older and wiser and because she's also carrying a miracle baby..." So, without further ado, Mary literally heads for the hills—that is, for the Judean hill country--where her cousin lives.... And that's where our gospel story for today picks up!

I wonder: Can you and I, sitting here comfortably in our twenty-first-century padded seats, even begin to grasp the jumble of emotions and thoughts that accompany this vulnerable young woman as she walks the 90 miles from Nazareth to the hills outside Jerusalem? Can we even begin to conceive of the fear and confusion, the awe and wonder Mary must be feeling as she ponders what it means to conceive and carry the Holy Child? I mean, one moment she's an ordinary teenaged peasant girl, going about her daily chores and daydreaming about her upcoming marriage to Joseph. And the next moment—bam!--this larger-than-life angel swoops in and tells her she's been chosen to be the mother of the Son of God!... Quite understandably, Mary is overwhelmed and uncertain, and that's something I think you and I can understand.... So, what do we humans do when we feel overwhelmed and uncertain? I think many of us do what Mary does: We go looking for a place of refuge, a safe space where we can rest and reflect, a place where we can be nourished and strengthened for what lies ahead. At the same time, we also go looking for the people who "get" us. You know: the ones who always answer your call--no matter what time it is; the ones who've got your back, no matter what's going on; the ones who'll even give you the shirt off their back, no matter what it costs them!... Whether you're connected by blood, by choice, or by a shared faith, these are your people!

On a recent Wednesday morning, Di Bernklau and I were commiserating a bit about how overwhelmed we feel by the many tasks on our respective plates this Advent season. But in the midst of our conversation, I felt a sudden surge of gratitude, and I said to her, "Oh well, it'll all work out in the end, and in the meantime, I'm looking forward to being with our people for soup and Advent worship tonight..." Di's face brightened, and she said, "Me, too. I look forward to being with our people!..." This conversation sprang to mind as I was reflecting on today's gospel

story about Mary going to visit her relative, Elizabeth. We know they're related because the angel Gabriel says so in his announcement to Mary. Of course, we also know they're intimately connected by the common bond of being first-time mothers in exceptionally difficult circumstances. But have you ever stopped to consider the strong bond of their shared faith?... If you're like me, you've probably noticed it in passing, assuming it's a given. But this year, I want to stay with the shared faith of these two remarkable women for a bit—just as Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months—because I think they have something to teach the church today. One of my favorite biblical scholars, Debie Thomas, offers this reflection:

Luke's account of the Visitation gives us a portrait of Mary that cuts through most of our assumptions and stereotypes. A nuanced portrait that balances fear with courage, doubt with faith, vulnerability with strength. Along the way, it gives us a portrait of ourselves — of what we, the Church, might become at our very best. Here, then, are three gifts I believe the Visitation story offers us for our Advent meditations.¹

Following Debie Thomas's lead, I'd like to focus on three gifts the church can receive from Mary and Elizabeth. The three gifts are community, blessing, and hope. Let's take the gift of community. Now, I know that being in community can sometimes be a pain in the patootie because communities are made up of imperfect people like you and me, and so, while life together can be wonderful, it can also be messy. Sometimes it's both at the same time!... Of course, the same can be said of our families, as well. And yet, having said that, I think you and I would agree that the blessings of community far outweigh the burdens. [Amen?...] I mean, that's why we're here today! We're here because it's impossible to be Christians on our own!.. As followers of Jesus in this world where so many things run contrary to God's way, we need each other, just like Mary and Elizabeth needed each other. God has given us the gift of community because we need to pray together. We need to ponder together. We need to eat together. We need to serve together. We also need to encourage each other, bless each other, and hold each other accountable. Search the Scriptures, friends, and you'll find that these are our instructions for living together as God's people.

I'm curious: Have you ever wondered what Mary and Elizabeth talked about during those three months? [Show of hands, if you've ever tried to imagine what their conversations were like!...] Also, have you ever noticed that the men, Joseph and Zechariah, are silent during this time when God's saving plan is being conceived, carried, and birthed?... In verse 40, Luke tells us that Mary entered "Zechariah's house," but Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, never speaks. If you've heard the rest of the story from earlier verses in Luke 1, you'll recall that while he's performing his priestly duties in the temple, an angel strikes him mute for daring to question God's revelation that he and Elizabeth are going to have a child in their old age. In fact, Zechariah isn't able to speak again until after the birth of their son, John!... So, Elizabeth and Mary have space to talk about whatever is on their hearts and minds, while Zechariah can only listen!.. I imagine they talk about their miraculous pregnancies and about their vulnerable social situations. I imagine them

¹ Debie Thomas, "A Visit and a Song," www.journeywithjesus.net, 16 December 2018.

conversing about practical matters like childbirth and how to swaddle, bathe, and feed their babies. I imagine them commiserating and comforting each other when neighbors point at them or turn away, snickering and gossiping. Paradoxically, I can also imagine their long days of confinement are immensely freeing, as the two women share their faith in God's steadfast love and their hope in the new life growing within them.... As I imagine all these things, I can't help thinking, "This is the gift of community at its best!" And I pray that Zoar can grow more and more into this kind of community: a community where people feel safe being who they are and speaking what's on their hearts; a community where we encourage each other; a community where we bless and empower each other to use our unique God-given gifts in service to our neighbors.

The second gift Mary and Elizabeth offer to the church is the gift of blessing. As I said earlier, Mary's hometown, Nazareth, is about 90 miles from the Judean hill country where Elizabeth lives; it would've been about a five-day journey. And all along the way, questions such as these would've been Mary's constant companions:

Is Joseph going to stick around? Will my parents still love me? How will I survive the pain of childbirth? Who will help me when my time comes to deliver? Who will support this baby if my fiancé bails? Who am I to raise the son of God? Is any of this for real, or am I losing my mind?...²

By the time Mary arrives on Elizabeth's doorstep, weary and worried, she's in desperate need of a blessing. And the Holy Spirit responds to Mary's need by speaking through Elizabeth, pouring out a powerful blessing--a blessing that reassures Mary that what's happening is real and that long after the vision of the angel has receded, God's promise will still be there. Furthermore, Elizabeth's blessing encourages Mary to lean hard into her faith because her trust in God is the only thing that will sustain her, as she lives into her calling to be the mother of God's Son.... My friends, many of us know from our own experience how quickly children grow up. And being familiar with the story of Jesus' life, you and I know it won't be long before Mary gives birth in a smelly stable, flees to Egypt with her family as a refugee, and watches helplessly as her son is arrested, mocked, tortured, and killed.

Like Mary, you and I could also use a blessing. And just to be clear, I'm NOT talking about the "hashtag blessings" of wealth or good fortune we see splashed across social media. Nope! I'm talking about a real blessing—a blessing like the one Mary received from Elizabeth. That's the kind of blessing that endures! That's the kind of blessing that can be carried in our hearts throughout our lifetime, and because it's from God, it can never be taken away from us.... So, what if we were to adopt this very countercultural practice of blessing each other? Can you and I even begin to imagine what might happen in our church community, if we were to make a point of intentionally naming and blessing the divine gifts we see in each other? Debie Thomas offers this observation:

² Ibid. I'm grateful to Debie Thomas, who compiled this insightful list of questions Mary may well have been pondering on her journey.

Elizabeth 'exclaims with a loud cry' when she recognizes God's life-changing work in Mary. What a compelling image. Joy flourishes when we're willing to humbly bless each other!³

In receiving the gifts of community and blessing, Mary also receives God's gift of hope. As this hope fills her entire being, she lifts her voice and sings prophetically of the great reversal God is working through Christ for this world God loves so deeply. I think most of us know that Mary's subversive song has come to be known as "The Magnificat." Some of us have been singing it during our midweek evening prayer services the past three Wednesdays. But did you know that many Evangelical Christians don't read beyond verse 49? So, they leave out all God's radical works of mercy and justice, glossing over Mary's prophetic witness, while her depicting as a humble, obedient, quiet "vessel" for the birth of God's Son, Jesus!... Also, are you aware that Mary's song has been banned by certain governments because their leaders believed the hope it proclaims is dangerous?! It's true! For example, the Magnificat was banned when the British ruled India because the authorities feared it might incite a revolution. It was also banned in Guatemala and Argentina for similar reasons during the late 70s and early 80s....

Friends, Mary sang the Magnificat because she was filled with joy and gratitude for the blessing of bearing God's saving love for the sake of the whole world. To say it another way, Mary was on fire with divine love, and she just couldn't help sharing the Good News of God's still-unfolding plan to restore the whole creation!... As God's people, you and I stand in a long tradition of storytellers and singers. These poor and vulnerable ones have dared to lean into the faith that holds all of us in and through and beyond all the troubles of this world. And God's little ones have discovered an amazing thing: When you tell the story and sing a song about what God is up to, the very act of telling and singing will fill you with a courage and clarity beyond your wildest dreams!... So, I can't help wondering: What is your Magnificat, friends? As we go back out into the strange and desolate land outside our church doors, what song of joy and gratitude will you and I sing to the Lord?

³ Ibid.