

My Soul Magnifies the Lord

Luke 1:39-55

This scripture pushes us toward the intimate narrative about the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth. The scale of this story hardly seems grand enough for this fourth Sunday of Advent, but it may be just what we need. We come to worship on this day battered by the gauntlet we politely call "the holidays." The stress of balancing work and home expands beyond the normally dangerous levels of contemporary life, as families aim for an outdated holiday ideal. Those of us who grieve or doubt or question find little platform or patience for our concerns. Many families feel envious of others whose Christmas card pictures look more prosperous, or more harmonious, or just plain more beautiful. Emotions are raw and cultural nostalgia crowds out gospel truth as we look backward, rather than God-ward, for inspiration. "A mere trifle consoles us," as the French savant Pascal put it, "for a mere trifle distresses us."

To our lonely and fragmented souls, Luke bequeaths a wonderful pre-Christmas gift: a small story about a genuine connection between two pregnant women of different generations. In this text we see God at work in a deeply personal way that also just happens to change the world!

This passage is commonly known as the visitation; it includes the meeting of Mary with her relative Elizabeth (vv. 39-45), and the song Luke records as Mary's response to Elizabeth's blessing (vv. 46-55). Luke clearly intended to link the births of John the Baptist and Jesus.

In this first chapter of Luke, before our scripture, we learned that a priest had been visited by an angel who informed him that he and his wife would

have their first child in their old age, very much like the story of Abraham and Sarah. Because of the priest's unbelief he was unable to speak until God's promise was fulfilled, until his son was born. Six months later Mary was visited by the angel and told that she would also have a son, God's Messiah, and that Elizabeth, who had always been unable to have children would soon have a child. Mary accepted her role in God's plan and proceeded with faith...although she knew that many would not believe her story. Our scripture recounts Mary's visit to Elizabeth.

Did Mary need confirmation and encouragement to continue believing God? Or should the word of Gabriel have been enough for her? It is easy to imagine that she might have had second thoughts and doubts afterwards. Calvin concedes as much and commends Mary for seeking confirmation: "There is nothing we should reckon odd in her seeking to confirm her faith by going to see the miracle which the angel had effectively brought to her notice. The faithful may be satisfied with the unadorned Word of God, and yet neglect none of his works which they realize provide support for their faith. Mary was above all right to seize upon the help afforded her, if she did not wish to reject what the Lord had deliberately put before her."

While Mary did receive confirmation and encouragement from Elizabeth, Luke may have made a different point, namely, that Mary went to *offer* confirmation and encouragement, rather than to *receive* them. Gabriel's announcement brought Elizabeth's situation to mind, and it "connected the dots," as they say, and she concluded that Elizabeth needed to know what God was doing. In one of his homilies on the Gospels, Bede observed: "[Mary] went so that she could offer her congratulations concerning the gift which she had learned her fellow servant had received. This was not in order to prove the word of the angel by the attestation of a woman. Rather it was so that as an

attentive young virgin she might commit herself to ministry to a woman of advanced age."

Mary's presence turned out to be significant confirmation for Elizabeth. As Mary approached, Elizabeth's child "leaped in her womb," and she was filled with the Spirit and offered a blessing upon Mary and her unborn son. Elizabeth's blessing acknowledged the special role that Mary had as the mother of the Savior: "Blessed are you among women" (v. 42) and "blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished" (v. 45 NIV). Elizabeth's acknowledgement of Mary's condition was revealed by the Holy Spirit, so that subsequent blessing was prompted by the Spirit.

The work of the Holy Spirit was made manifest as the baby in Elizabeth's womb (John) responded to Mary's greeting. As well-timed baby kicks often do, this one opened up the recipient to a new awareness and understanding of unfolding events. Though Zechariah, the officially sanctioned priest, was silent during this episode, it was the unassuming "preacher's wife," Elizabeth, who functioned as a de facto prophet. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, she articulated for Mary an outline of the special role the younger kinswoman had been called to play. Elizabeth's prophetic witness also encouraged and strengthened Mary. Recognizing her own vocation in Elizabeth's description, she was empowered to share the bold words of the Magnificat. What began as a simple visit to the home of a sidelined priest in the "hill country" issued forth in a pronouncement of global political and economic importance.

Mary's Song celebrated the greatness and covenant faithfulness of God. God is sovereign in the world and displays God's greatness by displacing the proud and the powerful, sending the rich away empty handed (vv. 51-53). God is great, but equally important—and harder for us to believe our day—God is good. God's demonstration of power was not merely a show of force, but was

intended to remind Israel that they belonged to God and could count on their God to help them. God's power and greatness display God's goodness. As A. W. Tozer observed nearly fifty years ago, "The greatness of God rouses fear within us, but His goodness encourages us not to be afraid of Him. To fear and not be afraid—that is the paradox of faith." Mary's fear of God was unafraid, and in her song we hear of both sides of God's goodness in action, the grace *and* the mercy of God. Mary bore witness to the grace—the unmerited favor—of God, who had done great things for her and looked with favor upon the lowly and filled the hungry with good things. God's mercy (Heb. *hesed*; Gk. *eleos*) is found in forgiveness and long-suffering patience with the weakness and corruption of humanity.

We also discover here that humility is the proper attitude of God's people in response to God's goodness. Calvin observed: "If we contrast Mary's poor estate with high estate we may see that Mary, in emptying herself, elevates God alone. This is no false humility, but the plain and sincere statement of a conviction that she had graven on her heart" (Calvin, *Harmony*, 35). God has claimed us as his eternal possession, and we rejoice in God's goodness.

God gave Mary and Elizabeth two things they each lacked: community and connection. God removed their isolation and helped them to understand themselves more fully as part of something larger than their individual destinies. Together they were known more fully, and began to see more clearly (cf. 1 Cor. 13:12), than they did as individuals. The development of hope within community takes time. How many of us are Marys and Elizabeths (or Zechariahs and Josephs), awaiting an opportunity to connect more deeply with the people around us? How many of us long to connect our small stories with the larger stories of God? How might we encourage the cycle of recognition and response that widens the reach of the Holy Spirit? Much can be learned

from sitting quietly with our brothers and sisters as the world pushes us relentlessly toward a louder, larger, and ever more expensive December 25. In our postmodern context, these words of Advent are deeply countercultural. Churches of the Christendom era enjoyed an easy familiarity with the wider culture: town Christmas trees, carols sung in school concerts, Christmas cards sent by politicians to their donors. Now the big, flashy events are largely focused around the twin idols of celebrity and consumerism. For good and for ill, the church has been marginalized. It is okay for us to be marginalized, because marginal people, like expectant mothers in the ancient Near East, have time to listen and wait. Those of us who are alienated by our culture might just be visited by the Holy Spirit.

The Magnificat celebrates God's goodness by recalling God's covenant faithfulness to Israel (v. 55). The covenant of God with God's people is the golden thread that binds together the Old Testament and the New Testament, the old Israel and the new Israel: "I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Lev. 26:12). Calvin noted: "Understand this, God spoke in this way to the Fathers of old, that the grace offered to them might come down to later generations also, for then by faith, an adoption was made of all nations, that they too might be spiritual sons of Abraham, who were not by nature" (Calvin, *Harmony*, 40-41).

We need to sit for a while with a people—and a God—who will accept us as we are, not as we feel we are expected to be. Experiencing true acceptance in worship, we may find ourselves asking Elizabeth's question: "And why has this happened to me?" (1:43). This very human-sized story prepares us for the grand, history-changing birth that is yet to come. We are strengthened, prepared, and deepened for our Christmas celebration. **Michael S. Bennett**

This is a day to prepare for the incarnation, news of the gospel, which was first celebrated by two pregnant women laughing and singing, and which enters the world through a young, unwed mother and a child laid in a manger because there was no room in the inn. **Charles L. Campbell** The best hope of the Christian in every age finds its voice in Mary's song, and it has rested securely on this: God is good, and God keeps promises. **Robert Redman**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.