

The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 19, 2021
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Micah 5:2-5a
Psalm 80:1-7
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-55

In those days Mary set out with haste to a Judean town in the hill country ...

Make no mistake, I love the story we'll hear here on Christmas: Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem; Mary giving birth and laying the babe in a manger; shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night; and angels bringing them good news of great joy. I love all that.

But that's only part of the larger Christmas story. This morning, we hear a bit more.

In those days ...

"Those days" are the days just after the angel first announced to Mary that God favored her, that she, though as yet not married, would conceive and bear a child who would be holy, the Son of God.

In those days Mary set out with haste to a Judean town in the hill country ...

We're not told why Mary "set out with haste" "in those days." But we can imagine. Best guess, I think, is that she was afraid. She had every reason to be. She was not married. And it would have been more than merely a scandal. She lived in a culture that allowed – arguably compelled – her family to kill her. Mary may have felt like she was running for her life.

And so she runs to Elizabeth. Her "relative," we're told. Maybe a cousin – I think that's what we've heard – but Elizabeth is considerably older than Mary, so probably more like an aunt (or even a great aunt).

Martin Brokenleg is a member of the Rosebud tribe. He says that among the Lakota people, "aunties" play a crucial role. It's not quite the same role they play in most contemporary Anglo cultures. Lakota aunties comfort and connect children with a world larger than their nuclear family. And they protect them. There is, he says, a ferocity that belongs to the office of "auntie." Inside Lakota culture, he says, everyone knows: you don't mess with an auntie. ⁱ

Maybe that's what it was like for Mary and her Aunt Elizabeth. In any event, when Mary enters the home of Elizabeth, she finds a protector. She isn't met with "doom and gloom"; she is met with joy. She doesn't find judgment; she finds welcome. Back home, Mary was irreparably "damaged goods"; at Elizabeth's, Mary is declared an honored guest!

Of course, I'm only guessing.

Maybe she was just understandably uncertain. Maybe Mary wondered if she had agreed to the angel's impossible proposition too quickly. Maybe she began to doubt the wisdom of it all as soon as the angel left. And maybe Mary was both unsettled and encouraged by something else the angel said to her:

And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.

That's something else the angel had said.

And if that were true for Elizabeth, then maybe everything else the angel said might be true for Mary, as well. Maybe that's why, after a restless night of tossing and turning – and of tossing and turning over the words the angel said – “Mary set out with haste” the very next morning.

Maybe she just needed to see Elizabeth with her own two eyes. Maybe seeing really is believing.

And what Mary sees, as soon as she lays eyes on Elizabeth (and before any words are spoken between them), of course, is that Elizabeth (even in her old age) is anything but barren. About six months further along than Mary, Elizabeth is most definitely expecting a child.

And then, after Mary greets her, Elizabeth begins to speak – or more likely to shout with a loud cry. Barbara Brown Taylor says Elizabeth doesn't speak in measured tones, “the way we make it sound in church.” Barbara Brown Taylor imagines Elizabeth shouting out her blessings.

Why is Elizabeth talking so loudly? Because she is excited that Mary has come to see her. Because her own baby has jumped for joy inside of her. Because there is new life popping out all over and she is so glad that her young cousin has the good sense to believe that what is happening to her is not an accident, nor a freak of nature, but a wedding gift from God. ⁱⁱ

Maybe “Mary set out in haste,” with only a hope that seeing Elizabeth would be enough to reassure that she wasn't going crazy. But if so, Mary gets so much more than she had hoped for. She gets blessed instead. Big time.

*You're so blessed among women,
and the babe in your womb, also blessed!
And why am I so blessed that
the mother of my Lord visits me?
The moment the sound of your
greeting entered my ears,
The babe in my womb
skipped like a lamb for sheer joy.
Blessed woman, who believed what God said,
believed every word would come true!*

Luke 1:42-45 (*The Message*)

And Elizabeth never needed any explanation at all. She never asked a single question. She simply takes Mary into her arms and lets her know that everything, finally, will be all right.

Mary is the focus of so much of our attention. And there is much for us to attend to this morning, but let's not pass over Elizabeth. We'd do well to pause just a moment and agree that she sets an example for all of us. As one writer puts it,

... we need more Elizabeths in the world. We need more people willing to move past judgement and shaming, and offer God's blessing.

We need people who look upon the world and see God's redeeming hand at work, not just see the worst in people and ourselves.

... for if there were more Elizabeths in the world doing that holy work, there just might be more people breaking out into holy song like little Mary. ⁱⁱⁱ

There is so very much to say about the "holy song" that Mary sings. The *Magnificat*, we call it. And if I say anything meaningful about it at all, I'll need more than one sermon to do so. So for now, I'll simply say that Mary's song echoes throughout the whole of Jesus' ministry. She who would raise Jesus started teaching Jesus before he was born!

And I note – with amazement – that this all but the work of a moment. (How long, after all, did it take to read the whole of this morning's gospel?) It's all so quick and immediate, the way we hear it here this morning. The greeting. The blessing. The singing.

And then it's done. That's how it seems. But that's not really the whole of it. This morning, we only hear about this moment in time. But if we had read just one verse past Mary's song, we would have heard:

And Mary remained with [Elizabeth] about three months and then returned to her home.

I've sometimes wondered what these two expectant mothers said and did over the course of the other 89 days, 23 hours, and 58 minutes that Mary remained there with Elizabeth?

There must have been other sacred moments never recorded for posterity. Mary would surely have told Elizabeth the story of how an angel had visited her and announced her pregnancy. And Elizabeth would surely have told Mary the story of how, six months earlier, an angel – the very same angel it would seem – had visited her husband, Zechariah, and announced to him that Elizabeth would become pregnant. Maybe the women laughed in delight at the similarities between their stories. Or maybe they fell silent together before the mystery of it all.

Maybe they enjoyed other deep conversations, the kinds of conversations two women (in their current conditions) might fall into. They must have shared some of their hopes and dreams for their respective children, yet unborn. And maybe they shared their fears, as well. They would have shared sacred laughter and sacred tears in those days.

Most scholars tell us that Mary would have been just a girl: 13 or 14, maybe; 16 at most. She must have had questions. She must have longed for someone she could talk to. She and Elizabeth could talk. They could compare notes about their appetites, their cravings, their mood swings, their backaches and their swelling feet. Elizabeth was further along, so maybe she could tell Mary some of what to expect, what to look out for and what to look forward to.

And they must have shared moments more mundane, as well. They must have talked about the domestic squabbles in the village and the tragedies of natural disasters and the atrocities of an oppressive regime.

But theirs was not a life of leisure. They weren't waited on hand and foot. They must have talked as they worked: as they cleaned and cooked, as they set up the nursery for Elizabeth's child. Sometimes they'd have been fully occupied with the tasks at hand. But then again, there would have been times when they were distracted and preoccupied. And they'd have slept and rested as they could, for rest is good – good for the body and good for the soul.

Mary remained with Elizabeth for three months. It was, we might imagine, a sacred time. And it was, surely, also ordinary time.

And the thing of it is ... John and Jesus, though yet unborn, were both with them the whole of that time. When they were praying and praising. And when they were doing housework. And when they were sleeping. And when they were daydreaming. And when they were preoccupied.

The Word was with them, in ways known and unknown; the Word was in their midst, whether they knew it or not.

It's a cautionary note, I think, not to too quickly divide the world into sacred and ordinary.

And that's what makes this a Christmas story, here on the 4th Sunday of Advent. For the Word is with us still, when we're paying attention and when we're distracted.

Elizabeth and Mary remind us that God comes to people, even people like you and like me, in the midst of our ordinary lives. Seen and unseen, God comes with an extraordinary desire to make a home in us – here and now and always!

ⁱ Richard Swanson @ <https://provokingthegospel.wordpress.com/2018/12/18/a-provocation-fourth-sunday-of-advent-december-23-2018-luke-139-55/>.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Singing Ahead of Time," in *Home By Another Way* (Cowley Publications, Boston, Mass., 1999), p. 17.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rick Morley @ <http://www.rickmorley.com/archives/2154>.