

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena Illinois
December 13, 2015
3rd Sunday of Advent

The Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell
Luke 1: 39-45

One of the things that I love about certain Advent devotionals, both the books and online versions, is that they provide the broad picture of scriptural themes for the Advent season. Much broader than the fragments we get on the four Sundays each year. For example, in the Sunday Gospel readings, each year Advent 1 gives us warnings about the end times and staying awake. Advent 2 and 3 are various aspects of John the Baptist: calling the people to repentance, preparing the way and announcing the coming of another. And Advent 4 is variable: last year, the Annunciation of Mary – the angel’s visit to announce to her that she will bear the Christ child. the angel’s visit to Joseph. Next year, the visit of the angel to Joseph in Matthew’s Gospel. And this year the visitation of Mary with her cousin Elizabeth. Sprinkled throughout the season in each year are opportunities to hear Mary’s Song, the Magnificat, either as an extension of the Gospel reading or as a canticle in place of the Psalm.

This arrangement makes sense. But at the same time, there are parts of the story that we miss altogether. So, without supplementary reading and study, we may lose sight of the larger story, God’s redemptive purpose for God’s people throughout the ages and our Christian belief that this is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, here at Grace, it is our practice to present Lessons and Carols on the 4th Sunday of Advent, so we risk losing those wonderful readings.

So, today, I have exercised some license by replacing the designated Gospel text. Instead of preaching on a second week of John the Baptist, the “voice crying in the wilderness,” preaching repentance and shouting out to the “brood of vipers,” on this 3rd Sunday of Advent, Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of joy represented by the rose colored candle in the Advent wreath, we will *hear* a story about joy, embodied joy. It may be that our world today needs John’s message. But, frankly, I think a little break from the harsh news that is in our face for some healing words might be in order today.

Let’s step back a bit in order to set the stage. Elizabeth, a relative of Mary, lives in a hill town in Judea with her husband Zechariah. She is the daughter of a priest, and Zechariah *is* a priest in the long line dating from King David. They are a devout and righteous couple, but their one heartbreak is that they have been unable to have a child and have now entered that time in their lives when they are beyond the child bearing years. Several times each year Zechariah goes from his home to Jerusalem to serve in the Temple.

During one of Zechariah’s times of duty, he is selected for the great honor of offering incense in the innermost sanctuary. This is an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and, in fact, some priests do not ever get chosen. As if this were not such an awesome task in itself,

when Zechariah receives the incense and enters that holy place, he is surprised to encounter the angel Gabriel standing beside the altar. The angel announces that Elizabeth will bear a special son. He is specific that the son's name will be John, that he is not to touch wine or strong drink, and that he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. John will also receive the spirit and power of the prophet Elijah that will equip him to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord.

Zechariah, of course, is incredulous – and scared almost senseless. And because he dares to question how this will come about, given his and Elizabeth's advanced age, Gabriel strikes him dumb. He will be unable to speak until that son is born. His other abilities are obviously not taken away, because in due time, Elizabeth is with child.

Several months later, Mary is also visited by Gabriel who tells her that she will carry the son of God. In addition to this announcement that, he tells her that her relative, Elizabeth is pregnant. And it is here that the curtain goes up on today's story (from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*:

³⁹⁻⁴⁵ Mary didn't waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zachariah's house, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly,

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!

Now, we know that scripture itself often does not give us extensive details. This little story, for example, is just seven verses long. It is interpretation – and tradition – that fills in the blanks. Tradition tells us that Mary, a young woman (some say only 12 or 13 years old), didn't blink an eye when Gabriel told her the news. There was no hesitation before she responded, "Let it be to me according to your word." Accordingly, she has become a model for openness and acceptance of (or submission to) God's will. She is revered, not only in Christianity but also in the Islamic faith.

I wonder if this sole focus might cause us to miss something else that is modeled for us, something more bodily. Something that can touch our human needs just as the tradition touches those of our spirit. There may be some more blanks to fill in Mary's visit to Elizabeth.

Suppose that in the aftermath of her annunciation, she began to realize what might be immediately in store for her. She was a poor, unwed teen, pregnant-- but not by her betrothed. This would have been far more scandalous in those days than in our time. Joseph was within his rights to cast her aside, in which case she would have been charged with an act of adultery, punishable by stoning. Did she wonder at all what Joseph would do? What people would think?

A time apart, away from home, might have been just the thing, a visit with a female relative also experiencing an extraordinary pregnancy. A very female thing to do in any generation! Elizabeth was a woman who was accustomed to scorn and ridicule as a formerly barren – and, therefore, incomplete and somewhat useless – woman. Now, carrying her first child as a senior citizen, she was probably a hot topic of gossip and had kept herself in seclusion for five months. So, here were two women, one very young, one quite old, who were probably perplexed, astonished, and, perhaps, scared to death of what was happening to them. So they reached out to each other to share their incredible situations and to affirm and encourage one another.

That affirmation certainly came for Mary as Elizabeth's baby leapt with joy inside her womb. And Elizabeth made what might be the very first Christian confession of faith, calling Mary "the mother of my Lord." Their two individual stories merged into one stream assuring both that it was indeed God working within them! It is only after this that Mary sings her Magnificat.

How often do each of us feel the flutter of something new that might be trying to be born within us? Maybe it is confusing or maybe we aren't even sure that it is really there. Do we have an Elizabeth to whom we can turn for affirmation and encouragement? Or do we just keep it deep within or explain it away?

The season of Advent gives us a built-in opportunity within our liturgical calendar to pause and to ponder. I have said before that Advent is more than preparing for the celebration of Christ's birth. We also need to prepare for a renewing of the vision of new possibilities that Christ has implanted in our hearts, of recognizing the incarnation of Christ in our world and the promise of God's realm for which we constantly hope. This is what Advent is all about, pausing once a year in this season of the shortest days and longest nights, lighting the candles, and asking ourselves: "are we living in expectation and awareness of God's coming through in ever new and remarkable ways?"

For Mary and Elizabeth, the in-breaking of God was dramatic. The new lives that took form within them were world-changing. Our own situations may be more modest, yet within each of us, there is blessed space where something holy can be born if we will only dare to open ourselves to the grace and power of God.

This is dangerous territory, of course. For when we make room for God, we let go of control. We become vulnerable. What God offers to fill that room may not be what we

expect and it may not happen when we expect it. Sometimes God turns the world upside down. Sometimes God pulls us down from our high places of self-concern, exclusiveness, and self-righteousness and requires hard things of us: meeting another's needs before our own, loving with unending love, seeing in each and every human being the image of Christ. It's no wonder that we feel fear and doubt – even terror – but we may also sense the glimmer of new possibilities and excitement for what can be. For it is only when dare to let go of the anxiety and, like Mary, leave behind the plans we have made to walk into an unknown future, that we can embrace the hope and new life and find the promise of the Christ event.

What is it for you this Advent? Are there hopes and dreams waiting to be born? Are there longings that dwell deep in your heart? What leaps for joy within your soul and spirit, blessed one of God?

Amen.