

## REFLECTIONS FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT ~ 19 DECEMBER 2021

### The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

Today, our Advent Wreath candles are fully lit, guiding us into these days leading directly to Christmas. The Gospel reading gives us two living guides, the two women who lead us across the boundaries of time and space into this new moment in history. The short Gospel passage is a familiar story, giving us the comfort of the known, and a thrillingly new story, calling us into the unknown.



Mary has just made her commitment in the presence of the angel Gabriel, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). This pregnant, unmarried teenager has not only learned that she will become pregnant but that her elderly cousin Elizabeth is also pregnant. Elizabeth, on becoming pregnant, had gone into seclusion saying, "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people" (Lk 1:25). These two women know society's way of seeing them as disgraced – Elizabeth because she has been barren for so long, and Mary because she is pregnant but not married. Mary first instinct is to run to Elizabeth – perhaps for both their sakes – to help Elizabeth and to find safety for herself. Mary and Elizabeth – the young and the old, the unmarried and the married, the socially established and the socially vulnerable – share the beauty and the gift of community, loving and supporting and nourishing one another. As Henri Nouwen describes this moment, "God's most radical intervention into history was listened to and received in community."

What unfolds in their encounter is beyond understanding! Two prophets meet ("filled with the Holy Spirit"); together, they announce the coming of the new time. Elizabeth blesses Mary twice – first, that Mary is pregnant ("the mother of my Lord") and second, that Mary has believed the promise made by God and agreed to be part of its unfolding. While the English translation uses the same word "blessed," in Greek the two words are different (*eulogemene/os* and *makaria*), showing the sense of two differing kinds of blessing. Elizabeth's words echo the blessings of Moses from the book of Deuteronomy as the people prepare to enter the Promised Land, "May you be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. Blessed is the fruit of your womb, the produce of your soil and the offspring of your livestock" (Deut 28: 2-4). This ancient blessing recognizes the interconnection of all God's creation.





The next verses from Luke will have Mary's words, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for God has looked with favour on the lowliness of this servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed" (Lk 1:46-48). Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes Mary's *Magnificat* this way: "It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings. . . This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is

instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind."

The first reading from Micah echoes this sense of the God who looks to the powerless and the forgotten, the least important ones, to herald the good news, "You, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days" (Mic 5:2). And this one who is to come has unusual qualities for a ruler and warrior, "shall stand and feed the flock in the strength of the Lord. . . shall be great to the ends of the earth; shall be the one of peace" (Mic 5:3-5). This one shall feed the flock, shall be great to the ends of Earth, shall be the one of peace. While we readily understand the feeding of the flock and the bringing of peace, only in recent years have we seen as well the reaching out to all Earth's creatures, human and other-than-human.

What does all of this mean for us? Meister Eckhart gives us the simple yet profound answer, "We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly, but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of Man is begotten in us."

This Christmas, like all Christmases, comes to remind us once again that we are invited into the fulfillment of God's promise as Elizabeth and Mary were. Our response will never be at one point in time. Instead, we renew our commitment to the promise, individually and in family or in community, over and over again. This past summer, the Sisters of Mercy renewed their promise as a congregation to "Mercying: Imaging the Face of God in all Creation ~ Misericordiendo: Siendo Imagen del Rostro de Dios en Toda la Creación." How will we renew our promise at this Christmas time? How will we "give birth to Jesus in our time and in our culture"? In what ways will we be "mothers of God" in this coming year? How will the Son of Man be begotten in us?

God does not invite us into the promise and then let us find the way on our own. In today's Psalm 80, the psalmist cries out three times, "Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved" (Ps 80:3, 9, 17). An old, married, socially established, and disgraced woman together with a young, unmarried, socially vulnerable, and disgraced woman teach us by their presence to trust that the God who makes the promise keeps the promise. "God's mercy is from generation to generation" (Lk 1:50). All we have to do is say "Yes."

In a beautiful prayer-poem, the spiritual writer [Jan Richardson](#), speaks to how Mary was received by Elizabeth and how we are to be received when we say our “Yes”:

You hardly knew how hungry you were to be gathered in,  
to receive the welcome that invited you to enter entirely –  
nothing of you found foreign or strange,  
nothing of your life that you were asked to leave behind  
or to carry in silence or in shame.  
Tentative steps became settling in,  
leaning into the blessing that enfolded you,  
taking your place in the circle  
that stunned you with its unimagined grace.  
You began to breathe again, to move without fear,  
to speak with abandon the words you carried  
in your bones, that echoed in your being.  
You learned to sing.  
But the deal with this blessing is that it will not leave you alone,  
will not let you linger in safety, in stasis.  
The time will come when this blessing will ask you to leave,  
not because it has tired of you but because it desires for you  
to become the sanctuary that you have found –  
to speak your word into the world,  
to tell what you have heard with your own ears,  
seen with your own eyes, known in your own heart:  
that you are beloved, precious child of God, beautiful to behold,  
and you are welcome and more than welcome here.

Let us delight in taking our place in the circle that stuns us with its unimagined grace. Let us become the sanctuary for others that we have found for ourselves.

Happy Fourth Sunday of Advent!