



Sunday December 19, 2021

Pastor Tony Acompnado

Luke 1:39-45, (46-55) (Fourth Sunday of Advent)

It's almost time. On this fourth Sunday in Advent, as the hectic month of December draws us even closer to the beautiful story we know and love – the story of a census, a messenger, an inn, a manger, and a baby – it's tempting to leap ahead. But please don't...not yet. Linger here a little longer. Linger here with Elizabeth and Mary and prepare to worship Emmanuel and celebrate the coming of God to us.

The story of the Visitation reminds us to return again and again to the center of the scandal, the center of the mystery. The story of the Holy One of Israel choosing an ordinary teenager through whom God planned to do extraordinary things. This is the God of reversals, the one who regularly shows up where we least expect God to be – a manger, a cross, amid vulnerability and suffering to scatter the proud, exalt the lowly, satisfy the hungry, and send the rich away empty. This is the God of justice and compassion – the one who hears the cry of the oppressed and responds in love and welcome. The story of Elizabeth and Mary and their experience teaches us that God prefers to be in the nitty-gritty, among the forgotten and fragile.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that when the angel Gabriel leaves Mary, she runs with haste. With a sense of urgency, the newly pregnant teenager makes a run for the hills which lie about eighty miles away and she doesn't slow down until reaching the home of her also pregnant cousin, Elizabeth. Luke doesn't elaborate on Mary's reasons for leaving Nazareth, but we can certainly imagine why a girl in her circumstances would make such an urgent journey.

Tradition tells us that Mary is only thirteen or fourteen years old when the angel appears to her. In her cultural and religious context, her pregnancy – unlike Elizabeth's – is not a gift; it's a disaster. At best, it renders her the object of gossip, contempt, and rejection in her village. At worst, it places her at risk of being stoned to death. I imagine that Mary runs to put both physical and psychological distance between her and those stones.

We should also note that what we experience on Elizabeth's doorstep doesn't take place in a sanitized bubble removed from fear, pain, and loss. This unexpected gathering over shared experience takes place amid the ordeal of uncertainty and hardship. Theirs is a gathering of refuge, one of healing, one centered in trust, hope, and surrender.

As they stand here at the threshold, Mary falls into Elizabeth's arms, the two women exchange stories, they confirm each other's testimonies with loving acceptance – and then a most unlikely response – genuine praise and wonder erupt between them. What emerges on this sacred doorstep is nothing less than worship. It takes place in the tender space between yearning and fulfillment. As Elizabeth and Mary reflect for each other the tangible, physical evidence of God's presence in their lives, their worship emerges in shared communion, shared fear, shared consolation, and shared hope.

Their worship sits right alongside their hardest questions. Will Joseph stick around? Will Zechariah speak again? Will Mary's parents disown her? Will the elderly Elizabeth live long enough to see her son reach adulthood? Will both women survive the dangers of childbirth? Will these mysterious babies, of such odd circumstance and unfathomable promise, really and truly change the world? Or will they die trying – and shatter their mothers' hearts with their deaths?

As they stand together on the threshold of their own unknowing, Mary and Elizabeth find a way to sing God's praises amid their fear and uncertainty. Elizabeth worships by declaring a blessing on Mary's unwavering faith, a blessing that bridges the gap between the delicate present and God's promised future. *"Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*

She's perceptive in connecting the dots in Mary's story, making the obvious connection between trust and blessing. To Elizabeth, Mary's "favored" status has nothing to do with wealth, health, comfort, or ease. Her blessing lies solely in her willingness to trust God. And Mary's ferocious faith leads her to lean completely into the angel's promise, believing that it will sustain her, no matter what lies ahead.

In turn, Mary finds her own prophetic voice and bursts into a song drenched with hope and promise not only for the child she carries, but also for Elizabeth's, and certainly for all the world's poor, brokenhearted, forgotten, and oppressed. *"My soul magnifies the Lord,"* Mary sings, and by her faithful song she magnifies for the world and makes more visible and clearer a God invested in radical and lasting change.

Mary's song describes a reality in which the sinful and unjust status quo of humanity is reversed – the proud are scattered and the humble are honored. The hungry are fed and the rich are sent away. The powerful are brought down, and the lowly are lifted up. Mary describes a world reordered and renewed — a world characterized by love and justice. An unfolding mystery that surprises everyone – one that only be birthed into being by the Christ child she carries in her womb.



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What these two women on the verge of new life celebrate is not the easy answer, or the carefree life, or even the guarantee of health, wealth, or happiness. What they celebrate is a God who sees. A God who pays attention to the tiniest and most intimate details of their circumstances, their desires, and their entire lives. “He has looked with favor,” Mary says.

Something powerful and transformative happens when we come before God to share our complete selves with God and each other. We begin to see the image of God in one another. In our fear, in our hope, in our uncertainty, and in our surrender, blessing happens. The spaces we create together glisten with the mysterious presence of God. The laughter we share becomes holy – and so do the tears. In the midst of these encounters, even if it’s only for a few trembling moments, we begin to understand the world as God understands it and see as God sees. Remembering that God delights in taking what is small and insignificant in the eyes of the world to do extraordinary and unexpected things.

Perhaps then, like Elizabeth and Mary, we might reflect on our own openness to the ways that God chooses to act in our world. To see what God is doing through unexpected people and how God is at work in unexpected circumstances. And might we even pause long enough to listen to the Spirit’s prompting when the bearers of God’s new reality show up on our doorsteps?

My friends, I’d like you to linger here a bit longer, so you won’t miss any of the beautiful details. God is coming to be with *us*. And maybe it’s enough this day to simply be amazed as we join Elizabeth and Mary and let our song of faithful living proclaim our own confident and courageous hope as we wait for God to do the unexpected. It’s almost time. It’s almost time. Thanks be to God. Amen!