

Sermon Preached by the Rev. John S. Nieman
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church
December 19, 2021 Advent 4/Year C
Texts – Micah 5:2-5a; Psalm 80: 1-7; Hebrews 10: 5-10; Luke 1:39-55

You and I know – because we've been here before – you and I know to expect to meet certain characters during Advent. We know we'll meet John the Baptist. We got a heavy dose of him over the past two weeks. We know we'll meet Joseph, the faithful adopted father of Jesus. Sometimes he's backstage, as he is this year, but we know he's here. We know we'll meet the angel Gabriel, whose job during this season is to announce pregnancies: to Zechariah, husband of Elizabeth, to Joseph, and to Mary. But mostly we know we'll meet Mary, the mother of Jesus. You might say she is the star of Advent: the young woman, perhaps just a teenager, whom God favors; the one Christians of the eastern churches typically call *Theotokos*, God-bearer. Billions of people have adored Mary over the centuries. Even today, Mary is honored not only by Christians, but also by Muslims. Many throughout the world ask for her intercessions.

This year we meet her not alone in a dark room where the angel speaks to her soul in her quiet solitude. Instead, we meet her as an already pregnant girl, excited to share the news with her much older relative, Elizabeth. The Church has set aside a day on the calendar specifically to commemorate this event: May 31st marks the Feast of the Visitation each year.

The story doesn't give us details about their visit with one another. That, to me, is an open invitation to use our imaginations. Can't you imagine these two women laughing together as they celebrate their miraculous news? Elizabeth is beyond childbearing years. Like her ancestors Sarah and Hannah, she was childless, and thought of herself to be long beyond the hope of ever having children. Yet here she is, pregnant. Mary is on the other end of the age spectrum. She's never been intimate with a man. Yet here she is, also pregnant. Both laugh at their good fortune brought about miraculously by the power of the Holy Spirit. Can't you imagine them commiserating about their morning sickness? Can't you hear them share their anxieties about parenting? Can't you hear them poking fun at their men, who, like most men in this situation, are somewhat clueless and out of the loop?

The women obviously are elated to see each other. And out of that elation come the well-known words from the lips of Mary: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior."

But before we get to the *Magnificat*, let's consider further this interchange between these two kinsfolk. Elizabeth says something profound to Mary after her own child, John, leaps in the womb upon hearing Mary's greeting. "Blessed are you among women," Elizabeth says, "and blessed is the fruit of your womb." The words form the heart of the "Hail Mary," a key devotional connected to the Rosary for Roman Catholics. It's important to remember that those words are rooted here, on the lips of Elizabeth, and are an exclamation of great joy and praise.

But Elizabeth says more. "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." What is Elizabeth referring to, here? There seems to be a backstory. And, of course, there is. She's referring to two earlier episodes. One is the annunciation of Gabriel to Mary, a story we know well. The other is a part of the story we might know less well. It's a passage that, unfortunately, is not included in our Sunday lectionary. It tells the story of Gabriel's announcement to Zechariah, Elizabeth's aging husband, that his wife will conceive and bear a son whose name will be John – John the Baptist, that is.

Zechariah is a priest, who has been chosen to offer incense in the Temple. As he is performing the oblations, alone with his thoughts, the angel appears to him and announces that his wife, Elizabeth, in her old age, will bear a son. He is to name him John. He will be great,

carrying the spirit and power of Elijah. His role will be to call the people to get ready for the Lord. We heard that message last week.

Now Zechariah, like good, inquisitive people throughout the ages, approaches this apparition with a healthy dose of skepticism. "I've got to know more," he thinks. "Let's face it: this is quite out of the ordinary. I need some more information. I'm old. My wife is old. This does not make any sense." So, Zechariah naturally requests proof of the validity of what he's hearing. "How will I know that this is so?" he asks.

The angel does not offer proof. Angels never do. He just tells Zechariah who he is. "Look, I am Gabriel. My job is to stand in God's presence and communicate what I see and hear according to God's pleasure. I've been sent to tell you these things. Need I say more? Now, because you refused to believe my words, you will be unable to speak until all these things occur."

And immediately, Zechariah receives a curse. He is rendered mute. He emerges from the Temple, trying to communicate, but all he can do is wave his arms at the people. So, he goes home until the message of the angel comes to pass. You can bet that will be the last time he will get wise with an angel.

Here's the thing. When Mary encounters Gabriel and hears the news that she is pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit, she responds very differently. Rather than demand proof, she simply stands in wonder. "How can this be?" For Zechariah, it's a question of satisfying his need for knowledge. For Mary, it's a question of standing in awe and praise of the God who works wonders. And then she responds with the words that have inspired the faithful for 2000 years. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Hence, the words of Elizabeth to Mary: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." And the subtext here is, "not like my bone-headed husband, who had to question the angel (although, I have to admit, it's kind of nice to have the house quiet for a while)."

There's something critical for us in the contrast between these two encounters with the angel. How do we respond to the mystery that is God? Is our default one of skepticism, demanding proof that what we encounter somehow fits into our understanding of the way the world is supposed to work? Or is our default a simple wonder, a celebration of what is beyond our knowing? There's nothing wrong with asking questions, nothing at all. We are a questioning people. It's part of our DNA. Even one of the prayers we say at baptism celebrates inquisitiveness: "Give her an inquiring and discerning heart," we say. Asking questions is a very good thing.

But there's a huge difference between inquisitiveness that seeks to contain mystery within the boundaries of our control and comfort, and inquisitiveness that seeks in wonder to probe the mystery beyond our ken. There's a big difference between insisting our faith conform to our rational processes, and resting in the joy of trusting that God's ways will always outrun our knowing. The first leads to our being shut up behind the walls of our puny minds. The second leads to our following God into the fresh air of awe and wonder. The first leads to a time-out at home. The second leads to the need to sing: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."