

Advent 4C 19 December 2021
Luke 1:39-45
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God our Father, the Advent Christ, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

"Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Let's pray...

The time of our salvation is approaching!

Today's gospel presents powerful imagery of our approaching salvation through the lives of two pregnant women. Elizabeth is too old to be pregnant, but, by the grace of God, is. Mary is too young to be pregnant, and a virgin, but, by the grace of God, she too, is. One's married, the other unmarried. One's child is the son of a man named Zechariah; the other's child is the Son of God. One will give birth to the voice who will cry out in the wilderness. The other will give birth to the Word made flesh. The time of our salvation is drawing near.

Today's gospel is referred to as the Visitation. Mary spends three months with Elizabeth. Luke is deliberately light on detail, focussing solely on the greetings. Ancient iconography portrays this greeting as one of embrace. But it's more than a simple hug and a "hello."

Today's gospel needs to be put in context for clarity. The angel Gabriel has just told Mary that she's been chosen and favoured by God, that God is with her, that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and the power of the Most High will overshadow her, that she will conceive and give birth to a son, the Son of God, and she will name him, "Jesus."

The story is so comfortably familiar that I think we lose sight of just how strange, unexpected, and overwhelming that experience must have been for Mary. I think there's little mystery as to why Mary "set out with haste to a Judean town in the hill country."

As soon as Gabriel makes his announcement and departs, Mary hoofs it. She hits the road and heads for the hills. Maybe she's excited and wants to share her good news. Maybe she wants to celebrate. Or maybe she's afraid and needs a friendly face; someone to talk to. Maybe she doesn't know what to do next and is looking for some guidance. Maybe she wants help in figuring out how to tell Joseph and her parents. Maybe she just wants to get away for a little while to try and process what's happened.

Whatever Mary's reasons were, you know what that's like. I'm sure there've been times when you've set out in haste searching for something or someone familiar to support you when something unexpected happens. Who has been your Elizabeth? When have you been Elizabeth for someone?

Throughout our lives we find ourselves in circumstances or situations that are strange, new, incomprehensible. They're beyond our previous experience and more often than not they leave us feeling alien to our own life.

It could be when you were first married, divorced, became a parent, a widow or widower, and you didn't know what to do. Maybe it was a time that you said something that hurt a friend and you felt estranged not only from that friend, but from yourself. I remember looking at myself in a mirror shortly after my ordination and seeing a stranger in a clergy shirt looking back at me and wondering, "Who is that impostor? Who am I?" Maybe someone saw something in you, a gift, a capability, a possibility, that you'd never seen or considered yourself, and that person they saw was a stranger to you. At some time or another we've all felt like strangers to ourselves, and we've needed help to regain our bearings.

Elizabeth is obviously Mary's go-to person. Mary doesn't go to her mother, Anna, her fiancé, Joseph, her local padre, or to a girlfriend around the corner. Not just anyone can handle or be trusted with our feelings of estrangement. Elizabeth is Mary's go-to person; Elizabeth her older cousin, who is getting on in years, "who was said to be barren," and who is now six months pregnant, just as the angel, Gabriel, had said would happen.

Now, the trip to Elizabeth's house isn't a gentle stroll through the village. Tradition says that Zechariah and Elizabeth lived in Ein Karem, a town just outside of Jerusalem and about 140km from Mary's home in Nazareth.

140km! Mary must have needed something that she could only trust Elizabeth to provide. I know when I'm thrown off-course, I need a place of acceptance and understanding, I need someone who'll love me and not judge, someone who'll be with me in the beauty, pain, and mystery of what's happening, someone who'll encourage and offer hope without telling me what to do, someone who'll speak the truth even if it hurts, someone who assures me that I don't have to do this alone, someone who offers his or her faith, hope, and love when mine's in short supply, someone who'll remind me that I'll be okay. Isn't that what you want when you feel like a stranger to yourself? Isn't that what you need from your go-to person, from your Elizabeth?

What I'm really talking about is the antidote to estrangement. Hospitality. Hospitality is the antidote to estrangement. I'm talking about the kind of hospitality that allows us to be accepting of ourselves. The hospitality Elizabeth offered Mary was more than a warm welcome, and a place to stay. It was an affirmation of Mary's life. It was a prayer commending Mary to God. It was a blessing that gave Mary back to herself.

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb," Elizabeth says to Mary. "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

"Blessed, blessed, blessed," says Elizabeth. Her words of affirmation, commendation, and blessing will remain with Mary the rest of her life. They will echo in the silence as Mary ponders and treasures the words of the shepherds at Jesus' birth. They will ring in her ears when Simeon declares that a sword will pierce her own soul. They will call her back to herself when her twelve-year-old son runs away to be in his Father's house. They will tend her broken heart at the cross. And they will sing with joy at the empty tomb.

That's how deep and authentic hospitality works. It's not just a word spoken or something done at a particular point in time. It's a Spirit that stays with us and continues to affirm, commend and bless. It's a Spirit that enables us to recognise God's presence and leap for joy. It's a Spirit that's pregnant with possibilities and gives new life. Hospitality is synonymous with the work of the Holy Spirit.

At the sound of Mary's greeting Elizabeth is filled with the same Holy Spirit. Elizabeth greets more than her younger cousin. She embraces God carried inside Mary. She acknowledges Mary as the mother of her Lord. Today Elizabeth greets salvation. And at the sound of Mary's greeting, John the baptiser, leaps for joy in Elizabeth's womb – the unborn prophet greets the unborn Messiah. Together Elizabeth and John, proclaim that the time of our salvation is approaching.

There're many ways our own lives are a series of greetings. Every day we greet one another – family, friends, colleagues, strangers, those in need. Every day we greet the joys, sorrows, successes, disappointments, losses, struggles, the mundane and the exciting. Every one of those greetings is pregnant with new life and opportunities for love, compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, joy, beauty, wholeness and holiness. In other words, the greetings of our lives are pregnant with salvation.

So, I wonder, how will we greet the next person we see? How will we receive the most recent news and circumstances of our lives? Will we recognise, greet, and embrace our coming salvation?

This Christmas, Dear Saints, I urge you to make haste to greet the coming salvation of our Lord, Jesus Christ; embrace the joy of being filled with the Holy Spirit; be blessed for believing that the Lord will fulfil his promise of salvation, and listen for the voices of angels proclaiming, "Make way, make way for the image of God!" because you carry the Christ-child in your hearts. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.