

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:39-55

The gospel of Luke, above all books of the New Testament, focuses on women. It begins with the birth of John the Baptist, focusing on Elizabeth, his mother. The next major section is Mary's story. Then follows the prophecy of an old woman named Anna. When the boy Jesus went to the temple to debate the rabbis, the only person Luke quotes is his mother. Many of Luke's stories from Jesus' ministry are about women: the woman who was a sinner, the bent-over woman, the widow who gave her last penny, to name just a few. At the resurrection it was only women who had the faith to go to the tomb. The text lists Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of Jesus and "other women."

The central character in the birth narrative, a story only told by Luke, is Mary, the person closest to the event. Many people think of Mary as a frightened little girl, overwhelmed by events far beyond her control – just a simple uneducated teenager. But there is another way to view Mary, a way more faithful to Luke's text. Here we find a determined, strong woman; a woman of power and influence, educated, sharp, committed. It is this resourceful, competent woman from whom Jesus learned much about God's will for him and for the world. The key to this understanding of Mary comes from today's text. We identify the poem Mary sung by the Latin translation of its first words, the "Magnificat," "My soul glorifies the Lord," which in Latin reads "Magnificat anima mea dominum."

We don't really know very much about Mary from Luke. We know the town where she lived, a dusty obscure village in the north, named Nazareth. Luke doesn't identify her family; they were nobodies from no-place. We know she was engaged to Joseph, a carpenter, whose family had come from the south, from Bethlehem, the city of David. Beyond that, Joseph is a faithful, courageous husband and father who protects his little family, and takes them out of harm's way when King Herod seeks to kill the infants of Bethlehem. But Luke reports not a single word Joseph spoke. We know that one day Mary receives a visitor, a messenger from God, the angel Gabriel. He tells her not to be afraid when she discovers she is pregnant. She has been chosen to play an important role in world history. On hearing the news, "Mary was greatly troubled," says the text. We can imagine she was! It is not every day an angel appears and tells an expectant mother the child she is carrying is to be called "the Son of the Most High." When she was certain of the pregnancy, Mary does a very feminine thing.

She seeks out another woman to talk to.
hears that her cousin Elizabeth is also pregnant,
trip south to the hill country of Judea
and stays there for three months.

When she
she makes the long
to visit her friend and relative

A veil is placed over the details of their conversation.
know what they discussed.

We don't

opinion, if it had been a man who had something important
a male friend, the whole thing would have probably been over in a couple of hours.

In my
to talk about with

We do know that Elizabeth realizes something important has happened to Mary and that she has
found favor with God – and she says so: “Blessed are you among women... and blessed is she
who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises.”

Again, it seems to me that most men will hardly offer that kind of affirmation to other men.

We might slap each other on the back,
most likely there won't be much tenderness about it.

but

Not so with Mary and Elizabeth.

Mutual support

and gentleness lie at the heart of their conversation. Whatever the nature of this three month long
visit, the result from Mary's lips is anything but the song of a frightened, ignorant girl.

She sings: “My soul glorifies the Lord,
spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

and my

Much of this beautiful song comes from a thousand years earlier. Another strong woman, named
Hannah, realizes she is pregnant.

Her child too will change the

direction of Israel.

She will call him Samuel, and he will

finally anoint David King.

Hannah sings: “My heart rejoices in the Lord; my strength

is exalted in the Lord. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble are armed with strength.

The Lord makes the poor rich; he brings low,

he also exalts. He raises the

poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap” (1st Sam. 2).

Ten centuries later Mary sings, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my
Savior...He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in
their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones but

has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent

the rich away empty.”

Mary must

have known Hannah's song.

She was not the

simple girl we have often pictured her to be.

Educated, knowledgeable

about the Scriptures, and tuned in

to the will and plan of God – that's the

Mary of the Magnificat.

In this song we already see

reflected the teachings of Jesus.

He identified with the poor, and had such

a difficult time with the powerful, the proud and the rich.

We see his rejection of violence, of competition

as the

source of wealth and power.

We see his teaching

that

abundance does not lie in doing well but in doing good,

that God demands

compassion, gentleness, humility and love;

that the meek would inherit the

earth,

that the merciful obtain mercy,

that the pure in heart will see God and

that the

peacemakers will be called children of God.

Yes, listen to the

words of Mary's song and

you will discover the teachings of

Jesus. Could it be that
these things Mary and Elizabeth talked about for three months?
Occasionally the world's most powerful politicians will meet to discuss big things, things of
crucial importance, things to save the planet. But these great
politicians do not have the same influence on the world as did two simple women, who met for
three months at the home of one of them somewhere in the hill country of Judea and talked.
From their long conversation comes a song and in that song
we already see the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of the Most High,
Prince of Peace, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, King of kings and Lord of
lords.
Therefore let's say with Elizabeth: "Blessed are you, Mary; blessed are
you among women. And blessed is the child you will bear." And we add:
blessed are all those who hear Jesus, believe in him, trust in him and follow him in
the ways of peace and justice and love.

Luke's story is about two women – one too old to be pregnant, the other
unmarried and too young to be with child. Neither had wealth nor
special social status, yet God made both of these
women to be unlikely messengers to bring exciting news, "good news of
great joy." Elizabeth
gave birth to a son named John, who prepared the
way for Mary's child, who was called Jesus.
God still reveals himself in the most unexpected places and
still works mightily in and through humble, common, ordinary and most
unlikely people "so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus
Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen." (1 Pet. 4:11b).