

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Luke 1:39-45

³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."



COMMENTARY:

Today's reading needs to be understood within the larger framework of the very deliberate parallels and contrasts that Luke draws in his early chapters between John the Baptist and Jesus—a relationship that many authors speak of as a "diptych" (a type of painting with two corresponding parts, hinged in the middle): "The meeting of Mary and Elizabeth is a surrogate for the first meeting of John and Jesus. Elizabeth speaks for John and Mary speaks for Jesus. Elizabeth bows and defers to Mary, the first point where the diptych becomes asymmetrical" (http://girardianlectionary.net/year_c/advent4c.htm).

"All is topsy-turvy here, at least according to ancient standards. A young girl should not be traveling alone in her own hometown, much less across country—but here is Mary doing so. Young girls do not receive blessings from old women, but Mary is honored by Elizabeth. Men are generally not privy to prenatal women-speak, but this private exchange is now broadcast to Luke's readers. News of this magnitude should come from Jerusalem, the holy city, and the Temple, the divine abode—but this newsworthy episode is situated in the Judean hill country. And men should be the first to know and speak of the work of God and to confirm the angelic message—but in Luke's narrative this deed falls to an old, secluded, pregnant woman." (Joel B. Green, "Hope from Unexpected Places," *Quarterly Review* Fall 2000, p. 337)

39-40: Although "in those days" *can* simply mean "at that time," it is also a "stock phrase" familiar from the Hebrew Prophets, where it is often used in descriptions of the coming Messianic Era and the judgement of God. Especially for readers familiar with the Old Testament, this expression could be an "eschatological hint" that we are crossing a threshold of history here, and that, with the events Luke is narrating, God is beginning to inaugurate the long-awaited era of salvation and renewal. It points us to the fact that, with the conception of both John and Jesus, a "new era" is beginning, and the slow but sure process of salvation has begun to unfold. The Promise is beginning to be fulfilled!

"went with haste": Grk *meta spoudēs*, "with earnestness, enthusiasm, eagerness, zeal, effort, speed, diligence, excitement": highlighting both *the importance of the message* Mary is carrying, but also demonstrating *her deep love and concern* for her aged relative, Elizabeth¹. Despite the earth-shattering

¹ The Church Father Origen says that, in addition, this "haste" reflects Christ's urgency (even within Mary's womb) to sanctify John for his prophetic mission. St. Ambrose says that the grace of the Holy Spirit, once received, does not allow one to loiter, but urges one into *immediate* action!

news Mary has just received, her first instinct is to reach out in love and support to Elizabeth; as the great mystics have taught, the true mark of an authentic spiritual experience (which for Mary occurred in the Annunciation) is the way it makes the recipient more loving, compassionate, gentle, etc. than they were *before* the experience. Mary's experience of the archangel Gabriel, and then of the Holy Spirit's overshadowing, flows almost seamlessly into *service, generosity and love*. Some French translations render this phrase as "avec empressement," i.e. "she rushed" to see Elizabeth. "When Luke tells us that ... Mary arose and went hastily into the hill country of Judea ... he is not describing simply her eagerness to see her relative. Precisely because the angel spoke of Elizabeth's pregnancy as part of the plan of God, Mary's haste reflects her obedience to that plan" (Father Raymond Brown, *A Coming Christ in Advent*, p. 66). "We ought to see here more than Mary's considerate kindness toward an elderly relative. Almost every word of Luke's narrative is potent with meaning. Mary's haste is an expression of her joy, faith and gratitude, themes that dominate the two chapters of the infancy narrative up until the end, when the prophecy of Simeon warns that sorrow will also be part of discipleship" (Mary Ann Getty-Sullivan, *Women in the New Testament*, p. 27).

"...The story as it stands gives some very natural insight into these two women's experience. They rejoiced in each other's pregnancy. They needed each other's support. They realized how blessed they were to be bearing God's miraculous gifts to humanity. What modern mother who willingly and intentionally bears a child does not sense the same joyful hope that they felt?" (<http://www.spirit-net.ca/sermons/c-ad04-js.php>)

"Any mother who has ever been with child in faith, who has ever been pregnant in hope, has rushed to the friend, the compatriot, the spouse, the family and announced the good news. The promise is terribly precarious. Anything can happen, suddenly, brusquely, and definitively. But the hope remains, and over time faith's long labor yields life. In some ways, I think, God is most appropriately thought of as a mother." (Father John Kavanaugh, SJ, St. Louis University; online)

As commentators point out, this would be a fairly unusual type of trip, since women in ancient Jewish towns were normally confined to their homes for the length of the pregnancy. It is even *more* extraordinary, since Mary may not yet have taken the second step to formalize her marriage to Joseph—she is thus a pregnant, unmarried woman (we don't know from the Gospels precisely *when* Joseph and Mary were formally married). "Under Jewish law, Mary should have been arraigned before a priest, and accused of breaking God's moral law. The Law required that, whether married or betrothed, the offender should be stoned to death (Deut. 22:24). The home of an ordained priest [i.e. Zechariah] would have been just about the last place Mary would have gone if she had anything to hide" (John Phillips, *Exploring the Gospel of Luke*, p. 68).

Although the text does not mention it, she would have been accompanied by someone from her family, to "chaperone" her, especially since she was probably only in her early to mid teens (14-17) at this point. This is in contrast to Elizabeth, who (like some of the Biblical matriarchs) is said to be too old to bear children (1:7)², and whose sterility can only be reversed by the miraculous intervention of God.

"We may suppose that she did not acquaint any of her neighbours at Nazareth with the message she had received from heaven, yet longed to *talk over* a thing she had a thousand time *thought over*; and knew no person in the world with whom she could *freely* converse concerning it but her cousin Elisabeth, and therefore she hastened to her. Note, it is very beneficial and comfortable for those that have a good work of grace begun in their souls, and Christ in the *forming* there, to consult those who are in the same case, that they may communicate experiences one to another;" (Matthew Henry, Protestant Biblical commentator)

"[Mary's] visit to Elizabeth suggests that she sought out the nurturing and mothering love of an older woman. Her own mother may have died, or Elizabeth may have been one of those people from the older generation who is in tune with youth and able to support a young person who is in crisis, as Mary was. Clearly, Elizabeth had such qualities, because she allowed her son, John the Baptist, to grow into his unusual vocation unencumbered. Perhaps Mary had already spoken with Joseph and seen his hurt and confusion, and even

² It is tempting for us to think of Elizabeth as "elderly" according to our average modern lifespan (75+ years); however, in Jesus' culture, many people only lived into their fifties or early sixties, so Elizabeth may only have been in her fifties at this point—presumably past the age of menopause. There would, however, still be quite a contrast in ages, since Mary was probably 40 years younger than Elizabeth.

though these feelings were soon replaced with renewed trust, she may have longed for the less complicated support than an older woman and family member could offer” (Penelope Duckworth, *Mary: The Imagination of Her Heart*, p. 16)

“a Judean town in the hill country”: Luke does not specify the exact location, but, since the earliest centuries, Christian tradition has identified the home-town of Zechariah and Elizabeth as **Ein Kerem** [Hebrew for “The Well of the Vine” or “The Spring of the Vineyard”], a small town on the outskirts of (and today in the shadow of) Jerusalem. In the sixth century, a Byzantine pilgrim named Theodosius commented that the town was situated about five miles from Jerusalem, and a seventh-century liturgical calendar from Jerusalem speaks of the celebration of St. Elizabeth in the town of “Enquarium”. The main Catholic church (of St. John the Baptist) is built on the site of several earlier ruined churches, and a cave which is traditionally the site of Zechariah and Elizabeth’s house, where John the Baptist was born. Nearby, the modern Church of the Visitation (likewise built over the ruins of several earlier sanctuaries) marks the traditional site of the encounter of Mary and Elizabeth.

“How exactly did Our Lady make the tiring journey from Nazareth to the place traditionally associated with the birth of John the Baptist, Ein Karem, nearly 100 miles away? Certainly not by camel, although this was the main means of transport in the constant comings and goings on the busy national and international caravan routes. Mary’s journey, over Judea’s rugged terrain, would have taken between a week and ten days³, and the best method by far (perhaps the *only* method) would have been by donkey.” (Ruth Rees, *The Rosary in Space and Time*, p. 56)

41: The “leaping” of John in his mother’s womb⁴ has a number of layers of meaning. In the ancient world, it was commonly believed that the “quickenings” of the fetus (the moment when the baby received its soul) was signified by the baby’s first noticeable movements within the mother. Here, we have, not simply an ordinary movement of a baby, but a dramatic “surging” of the unborn child, almost a type of “dancing” in the presence of the unborn Jesus⁵; as the Preface for the Solemnity of St. John the Baptist says, “even in the womb he leapt for joy, so near was [our] salvation”—for the ancients, this movement would signify something even *greater* than the moment of the baby’s reception of his soul! In the same way that King David had leapt and danced with joy in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant, so John is leaping and dancing within the confines of Elizabeth’s womb. “Mary was filled with the Divine presence as the ark was with the glory of Yahweh. And Mary’s coming to Elizabeth is a source of blessing, just as was the coming of the ark for the house of Obed-edom (2 Sam 6:11). What the Ark of the Covenant could only *signify* (and only in a *local* way), Mary makes a *reality*, and in a *personal* way: She is *an effective sign of God’s presence* with his people”

(<http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/meditations/visitation.html>)

Luke’s Gospel also puts particular emphasis on the way in which *the gift of the Holy Spirit* transforms people into prophets. Here, the Spirit is marking John out as a prophet, even before his birth, and his *actions* bear witness to the specialness of Mary’s son, just as his *words* will later do. In these early chapters of John, we see many “ordinary” people being transformed by the prophetic Spirit, and proclaiming a message that is inspired by God: Zechariah, Mary, and now John⁶ and Elizabeth.

³ Others suggest that, on average, Nazareth to Ein Kerem was actually closer to a *four-day* journey.

⁴ This particular verb (*skirteō / skirtaō*) is quite rare in the Gospels, used only in Luke, and only 3x: here (in vv. 41 and 44), and in one line of the Lucan Beatitudes, in 6:23 (“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day **and leap for joy**, for surely your reward is great in heaven”). For Luke, “leaping” seems to be an acknowledgement of God’s blessing and action in one’s life.

⁵ “John’s body talk said it all. The ecstasy of that leap in the womb—a religious dance—was its own sort of Gospel. It revealed the sheer joy of being filled with God’s Spirit” (Father Alfred A. McBride, *The Human Face of Jesus: Meditation and Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, p. 21).

St. Ambrose: “Elizabeth was the first to hear the words, but John was the first to experience the grace. Elizabeth heard according to the natural order, whereas John leapt on account of the mystery. Elizabeth perceived Mary’s coming; John perceived the coming of the Lord” (*Catena Aurea*).

⁶ Back in 1:15, the angel that appeared to Zechariah had promised him that John would be filled with the Holy Spirit, “even from his mother’s womb”.

Many scholars also see a possible parallel with the “leaping” of the brothers Esau and Jacob in their mother’s womb (Gen 25:22, particularly in the Septuagint Greek translation), in which the “leaping” hints at a future relationship (in Luke, it is only John who “leaps,” probably in deference to the *superiority* of Jesus, whereas Esau and Jacob are more or less *equals*, as brothers)⁷.

42: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb”: to many Catholics, these lines are most familiar because they form part of the core of the Hail Mary. Elizabeth does not simply *speak* these words; on the contrary, the text says that she “shouts them out with a loud voice”.

“Elizabeth, ‘filled with the Holy Spirit,’ was introduced into the depths of the mystery of the coming of the Messiah. Within her the Holy Spirit worked a special enlightenment, which found expression in the salutation she addressed to Mary. Elizabeth spoke as if she were participating in and witnessing the annunciation in Nazareth. In her words, she defined the essence of the mystery which was at work at that moment in Mary” (Pope John Paul II, General Audience, June 13, 1990)

“Blessed” (Greek *Εὐλογημένη*, *eulogēmēnē*) here has the sense of: “worthy of high praise [*eulogia*→eulogy] because of what God has done in your life”⁸. “Among women”: this has a superlative sense in Hebrew or Aramaic, that is to say, “You are more blessed than any other woman”; “You stand out from all women because of the blessing you have received”. This *first* blessing is clearly on account of the great privilege bestowed on Mary, of being the mother of the long-awaited Messiah. Theophylact, in his commentary on this verse, notes that sometimes the Greek “and” (*kai*) can have the sense of “because,” and therefore this verse would mean: “Blessed are you among women *because* the fruit of your womb is blessed”.

Similar wording is found in Judges 5:24: “Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed” and Judith 13:18: “O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all other women on earth; and blessed be the Lord God, who created the heavens and the earth...”. In both Old Testament references, the women to whom these phrases are addressed were great *heroines* and *liberators* of Israel; Luke wishes to stress Mary’s role in that illustrious lineage, although her contribution will be a spiritual and biological one, rather than a military or strategic one.

“the fruit of your womb”: this is a Hebrew idiomatic expression for a child. The wording here seems to echo Moses’ farewell in Deut 28:4: “Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock...”. It is also a literal fulfillment (especially clear in the Greek) of the promise of a descendant that God makes to David in Psalm 132:11: “[One] of the fruit of your body [Grk has *koilia*, “belly/womb”] will I set upon your throne”.

“While it is an honor for Mary to be chosen as the mother of the Lord, the honor is not unalloyed. ‘That very blessedness was to be a sword to pierce her heart ... God does not choose a person for ease and comfort and selfish joy, but for a great task that will take all that head and heart and hand can bring to it’ (William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible: Luke*, p. 8)” (from www.sermonwriter.com)

43: “the mother of my Lord”: obviously, it is hard to imagine how a devout early-first-century Jew would be able to speak in these exact terms (since “Lord” [*Adonai*] was the traditional Jewish way of referring to God without using the Divine Name, YHWH); the idea that God could in any sense have a “mother” would not have fit into the theological categories of Judaism, which stresses a strict monotheism and the majesty of God. However, it is clear from the context that Elizabeth is speaking, not out of her own human understanding, but under the influence of the Holy Spirit, which obviously enabled her to recognize in Mary the “bearer of God” (Grk *Theotokos*), a title that will later be officially

⁷ “The historical allusion is to Rebekah, in whose womb Esau and Jacob struggled, the message being in both cases, ‘The elder shall serve the younger’ (Gen 25:21-23) ... in both cases, the blessed child is the younger child” (Thomas W. Walker, *Luke* [Interpretation Bible Studies series], p. 10).

⁸ Although they are both translated in the same way in many English Bibles, this is *not* the same Greek term that we encounter in other contexts like the Beatitudes (“Blessed are the poor in the spirit...”); the adjective used there is *makarios*, on account of which Beatitude-style sayings are sometimes called *macarisms*.

conferred on the Virgin by the Council of Ephesus in 431. This is one of the first times (but not the last!) that Luke will use the title of “Lord” for Jesus, explicitly attributing divinity to Him.

We also need to recall (as the Church officially teaches) that not everything contained in the Gospels is a verbatim transcript of spoken words; it is possible that Luke’s wording here may have been influenced by the infant Church’s gradually deepening understanding of Jesus—and, therefore, of Mary His Mother.

44: In these lines (here and in v.41), Luke seems to emphasize that the very fact of Elizabeth’s *hearing* Mary’s greeting was the occasion for John’s “leaping” (“As soon as I heard the sound of your greeting...”). Mary’s words take on a prophetic, special quality that is able to communicate the Gospel Good News to her elderly kinswoman. Throughout Luke’s Gospel, the verb “to rejoice” (*ἀγαλλιαω*, *agalliaō*) and the noun “rejoicing, exultation, great joy” (*ἀγαλλιασις*, *agalliasis*) will characterize the appropriate response to what God is doing in and through Jesus.

As some writers have commented on, there is no sign of the human jealousy that *could* have overshadowed such an encounter; Elizabeth *could* have thought to herself that *she*, the wife of a priest, and someone who had lived a long life of faithfulness, was far more “worthy” to be the mother of the Messiah than a simple naïve teenager from Nazareth. She *could* have envied the fact that Mary’s child had been conceived by a virgin mother, which was certainly a greater miracle than allowing an older woman to conceive. And yet there is no sign of any friction, jealousy or rancour—simply the love and shared rejoicing of two women who care very deeply for each other, and who were both profoundly grateful and awe-struck at the wonders that God was accomplishing in and through them.

45: Elizabeth’s words seem directed to the situation of *both* women, who have conceived “against all odds,” trusting only in God’s power in what seemed humanly impossible circumstances. The blessing here employs a *different* Greek adjective than in v. 42; the term here is *μακαρια*, *makaria*, which has more the sense of “happy, fulfilled, prosperous, contented, living in enviable circumstances,” and often has a nuance of *divinely-granted* happiness. It is frequently applied in secular Greek to deceased loved ones, those who enjoyed eternal peace and blessedness in the company of the gods; it is therefore linked to God and, in the Bible, to the consequences of a “right relationship” with the Almighty.

Throughout the entire Bible, the repeated message is that God’s word and promises can be relied upon—that they *will* be fulfilled, and are trustworthy. So Elizabeth’s concluding words express a deeply Biblical—and profoundly Jewish—conviction: to trust in the Lord and in the Lord’s promises (no matter how seemingly impossible) is the epitome of authentic faith, of which both Mary and Elizabeth are key exemplars for Luke. This *second* blessing is directed at Mary’s *faith and unquestioning trust in God*.

“Thus far in the interchange between the two women during the visitation, Elizabeth has twice blessed Mary. *Noblesse oblige* would almost require that Mary in turn bless Elizabeth. But in Luke’s vision of this scene, this is the appropriate moment to insert the Magnificat, with the clear effect that, if Elizabeth blessed Mary, ‘the mother of my Lord,’ Mary now blesses the Lord Himself” (Brown, *A Coming Christ*, p. 67)

Thomas Merton (+1968), “The Quickening of John the Baptist”:

Sing in your cell, small anchorite,
What secret syllable
Woke your young faith to the mad truth
That an unborn baby could be washed in the Spirit of God?
Oh, burning joy!
What seeds of life were planted by that voice?
With what new sense
Did your wise heart receive her Sacrament
And know she cloistered Christ?



(Mural from Conception Abbey, Conception, Missouri)

Blessed Gueric of Igny (ca. 1070-1157), *Second Sermon for Advent*:

Brothers [and sisters], let us arise with joy and run in spirit to meet our Savior. Hailing him from afar, let us worship him, saying: Come, Lord, *save me and I shall be saved!* Come and *show us your face, and we shall all be saved. We have been waiting for you; be our help in time of trouble.* This was how the prophets and saints of old ran to meet the Messiah, filled with immense desire to see with their eyes, if possible, what they already saw in spirit.

We must look forward to the day, so soon to come, on which we celebrate the anniversary of Christ's birth. Scripture itself insists on the joy which must fill us—a joy which will lift our spirit out of itself in longing for his coming, impatient of delay as it strains forward to see even now what the future holds in store ...

And so, my brothers [and sisters], though we have not yet experienced this wonderful consolation, we are encouraged by firm faith and a pure conscience to wait patiently for the Lord to come. In joy and confidence let us say with Saint Paul: *I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am confident of his power to guard what has been put into my charge until the day when our great God and Savior Jesus Christ comes in glory.* May he be praised for ever and ever! Amen.

I think we all sin by needlessly disobeying the apostolic injunction to “rejoice” as much as by anything else. (C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*)

A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes...and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside, is not a bad picture of Advent. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Rev. James Liggett (Online at: http://www.dfms.org/sermons_that_work_27656_ENG_HTM.htm):

Secular holidays—cultural joy—will always fall short. They always have to be tinsel, or painted with gaudy colors, in order to look solid and impressive. That is because when the world looks to itself alone for fulfillment, when the world tries to find within itself alone cause for celebration and for joy, it can't. The world can find only emptiness—an emptiness it frantically tries to fill by tossing stuff, things of one sort or another, into itself. So the culture does not commercialize holidays because the culture intentionally seeks second best. Instead, the culture commercializes holidays because that is simply the best the culture can do ...

It is to all of this that the joy and hope of Mary and Elizabeth speak most loudly. For their joy is aimed directly at the world's pain—at *our* pain. Both women rejoice, both sing—yet neither celebrates anything of her own doing. Neither sings because of what she has accomplished, or because of what she deserves, or because of what the world is doing for her, or because it is the time of year people are supposed to sing.

Mary and Elizabeth sing because they have been given a new life to share. Each sings because that which nature and the world have named as barren is suddenly filled with life—life that will, in its own time, shake the foundations of a world that has absolutely no idea what is going on.

These two women rejoice, and we are called to rejoice with them, for one reason and one reason only: *because God loves us enough to act*. Their joy, and ours, is deeply rooted and real. Their song, and ours, is sung only because God loves us enough to come to us—to the most barren, the most unnoticed, the very least of us—and to plant in us, and in our world, God's own life, God's own hope, and God's own promises of peace. Our hope is in the name of the Lord ...

What God wants to do to you, to each of you, this Christmas, is exactly what he did for Mary and Elizabeth. God wants to put into your hearts, and into your lives, hope and joy. Real hope—the kind that isn't for sale and doesn't wear out; and real joy—the joy that begins deep inside. And God wants each of us, like Mary, to bear within us, and to carry to those around us, no one other than the Lord of life. That's what God wants.

Mary Heard the Angel's Message

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Mary heard the angel's message:
“Greetings, Mary, favored one!
Do not fear, for God is with you;
You will one day bear God's Son.”
Filled with questions, filled with wonder,
She proclaimed her faith in God:
“May it be as you have spoken;
I'm the servant of the Lord!”

When she heard her cousin's greeting,
Mary's heart was filled with joy,
So she sang of God's great blessing
Promised in her baby boy:
“God has looked on me with favor,
So I sing this song of praise.
God has worked, the proud to scatter ...
Humble, hungry ones to raise.”