

Advent IV – 2009
“Mary’s Visitation with Elizabeth”
Luke 1:39-45, 56 (NRSV)

The angel Gabriel’s announcement to **Mary** of the impending birth of Jesus began the astounding events associated with **the Incarnation**. The Virgin **Mary’s faithful and obedient heart** showcased the character traits essential for all who would experience the birth of Christ in their lives. **“Blessed among women”** (1:42), as her older cousin declared her to be, it was clear that **Mary was a living beatitude**. Her soul is **a model** for all who desire to cultivate the life of Christ in their hearts and lives.

What must further astound us is **her tender age**. Take a moment to consider, as **Joachim Jeremias**, a master New Testament scholar, states, **“The usual age for a girl’s betrothal was between twelve and twelve and a half”** (Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus, 1978, p. 364-365). This coupled with the custom that, after betrothal, the bride would live with her family for at least a year before formal transfer to the groom’s home, meant that Mary was just **beyond puberty**, and that she had not yet likely reached her adult height and figure. I suppose seeing someone so young married might be offensive to our postmodern, western sensibilities. Nevertheless, this twelve-to-fourteen year-old girl was not only chosen to be the mother of our Lord, but the model of a godliness, and she was given words to verbalize the most sublime spiritual realities that have challenge the greatest of saints.

Mary, despite her youthfulness, **shared the image of God** with the rest of humanity and **possessed immense spiritual capacity**. Though she was **likely illiterate, she understood deep theological realities**, as her sublime song, commonly called “The Magnificat” would attest. Though Mary was so young, the world also sings of **her amazing faithfulness and obedience**.

The church must never make the mistake of minimizing or patronizing its children and youth. Children must be taken seriously. Teenagers must be honoured, even while being intelligently challenged. Young people must be welcomed as they are. The church must invest deeply in the spiritual nurture and discipling of its young.

1. Mary journeys (Luke 1:39).

We take up Mary’s story with her immediate decision to visit her barren,

older relative, Elizabeth, who as Gabriel had just revealed to Mary (1:36), was also pregnant and now six months along. Her pregnancy was also surprising, even miraculous – people that old do not usually bear children -- but we must never confuse how vastly different it was from the miracle occurring within Mary. Barren Elizabeth was not a virgin, and Zechariah was the natural father of her child. Nevertheless, what a surge of joy must have swept through Mary as she heard the shocking good news about the miracle in Elizabeth’s womb, for it bore parallel testimony to God’s gracious hand and power.

Luke reports Mary’s happy response matter-of-factly: “Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country ...” (1:39). Usually, unless there are mitigating circumstances, when people are going to have a baby, **they can’t wait to share the good news with others**. Mary must have made last minute arrangements with her parents. Did she tell them? We do not know. She rushed the eighty to 100 miles south, a three or four-day journey. Her haste indicates **eagerness**. She couldn’t wait to get there. There was no time to put on make-up. There was no telephone call she could make or cell phone she could take along to let Elizabeth know she was coming. And there was no time for the usual leisurely teenaged conversations with others along the way. As she hurried along she must have thought long and deep of their crossed destinies. And, then, she was there, breathless, unannounced, silhouetted in the old couple’s doorway.

There is a **strong human joy** portrayed in the meeting of these two expectant mothers – one in the flower of youth, the other’s bloom long gone. These two were to become innocent co-conspirators, soul-sisters in the divine plot to save the lost of the world. They would share their hearts as few women ever have. Through their birthing pain, sweat and blood, and their mothering skills, too, the world would receive its greatest blessing. No wonder we should take a moment to reflect on this unique, holy visitation.

2. **John leaps** (Luke 1:40-41, 44).

The meeting was appropriately **dramatic**. Verses 40-41 tell us, “... she [Mary] entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb” (1:40). Later, when they were sitting down, likely talking things over -- as women do so well -- Elizabeth explained, “For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy” (1:44). The sense here is that

before Elizabeth could return Mary's greeting, the child in her womb leapt. John responded before his mother could.

I would think **only a mother can relate to the sensation** described here, because more than a prenatal kick or turn, it was **a leap, an upward vault**. When she was pregnant, Colleen allowed me to feel some of each of our three children's prenatal movements in her womb by placing my hand upon her tummy, so I know a little of what this might have involved, but this was something different. Commentators tell us the word "leaped" used here describes "a skipping or leaping, as of sheep in the field" (Raymond Brown, The Birth of the Messiah, 1979, p. 44).

Why did Elizabeth's baby react in this way? The answer is twofold. First, there was **an incipient prophet** in her womb, and this was his first intimation of symbolic prophetic utterance. John the Baptist's ministry, pointing to Jesus, was beginning three months before his birth! God's own Holy Spirit, with whom he was filled before his birth, prompted this inner leap. John's joyous leap was lived out in life some thirty years later when he compared his prophetic joy in announcing Jesus as the Christ with that of a friend of the groom at his wedding, saying, "The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled" (Jn. 3:29b).

Secondly, John leapt because he was **overcome with the emotion of joy**. The more exact sense of the Greek used here is that the foetus of John the Baptist "**leaped with delight**" (E. Earle Ellis, Gospel of Luke, p. 76; cf. also 1:41 with 1:44). "Although it is said that an emotional experience of the mother can cause a movement of the foetus, it is more likely that a miraculous expression of the emotion of the unborn child is meant" (I. Howard. Marshall, Gospel of Luke, 1978, p. 80).

And then there is this: do not miss the point: this foetus, yet to see the light of the world, was **already a person**, and he **already had a divine purpose**. He was made to leap with delight at the intimation that Jesus Christ would be born! The psalmist speaks eloquently of God's superintendence of the wonders of life in the womb (Ps. 139:13-17).

John would then have been about nine inches long and weighed about one and a half pounds. He would have looked like a perfectly miniature newborn. His skin would have been translucent. His tiny ten fingers and ten

toes would have had fingerprints and toe prints. And, sometimes, for brief periods, he would have been able to open his eyes and gaze into the liquid darkness of his mother's comfortable womb. Of course neither Elizabeth nor Mary would have known much about this but, we do, having the advantages of modern science and, so much so, that we even have detailed pictures of the beginnings of life in the womb!

If John could have spoken, he might have quoted **Job**: "Did you not pour me out like milk and curdle me like cheese, clothe me with skin and flesh and knit me together [in my mother's womb] with bones and sinews?" (10:10-11). As a foetus of six months, John was **already an emotional being**. He had the capacity to be filled with the Holy Spirit. He was so overcome that he leapt with joy. This is a sobering revelation about the sacred nature of human life.

But there is more. Mary, of course, had already conceived. She was four of five days pregnant. **Jesus was what we call a zygote**, and when Jesus, a zygote in the womb of his mother, entered the room, John the Baptist, still only a six-month foetus, leapt for joy.

3. **Elizabeth addresses Mary** (Luke 1:42-45).

Elizabeth addressed Mary as one who was truly "blessed among women," and, further, that "blessed is the fruit of your womb" and finally, that it is in fact, "the mother of my Lord" that came to her (1:42-43).

In view of all this I pose a serious question: **what if young Mary had obtained an abortion** – after all, this baby she was to have was conceived "illegitimately" as we used to put it. I ask this with the greatest of compassion, realizing that some who are listening may have had an abortion, or know others who have found that they have had to go that route. There are certainly, some situations where abortion may, even must be considered, say where the mother's life is actually endangered, but it is a grave and difficult choice. Our responsibility to protect unborn life is immense. But whatever the past, it is important to remember that all of us are under the grace and the kindness, the love and the mercy of God. And he has been and will continue to be with all of us in whatever choices we make.

One of my favourite poets, **Luci Shaw**, has a lovely poem that pictures this moment:

Framed in light,
 Mary sings through the doorway.
 Elizabeth's six month joy
 jumps, a palpable greeting,
 a hidden first encounter
 between son and Son.
 And my heart turns over
 When I meet Jesus
 in you.

As John vaulted in his mother's womb, Elizabeth underwent an elevation of soul, an inner expansion of her human spirit, even as the Holy Spirit took hold of her. She saluted Mary as **"the mother of my Lord"** (1:43). No doubt, it is this verse that inspires Orthodox Christians to speak of Mary as "theotokos" -- **"the mother of God."** Certainly, a realization dawned upon Elizabeth that her "relative" would, in due course, give birth to the Messiah, the Son of God incarnate. And so she offered Mary a double blessing: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (1:42). As far as she was concerned Mary was **"most blessed."** Young **Mary must have been touched**, even if she was still not a little bewildered, by Elizabeth's words. Yet, here was **one who**, without much explanation, **understood** the secret she'd be carrying for the next nine months, **and who celebrated** it by pronouncing a double blessing and the affirmation that, indeed, Mary was carrying the Lord and Messiah in her womb.

Elizabeth concluded her words with **another beatitude**: "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" (1:45). To catch the sense here, we must remember that Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, had not readily believed the angel's words, and who was, most probably, standing deaf and mute, at Elizabeth's side. Perhaps there's harshness displayed in Elizabeth's personality here: for her beatitude played off Zechariah's failure to believe. Maybe it was a good thing that Zechariah did not have to hear what his wife said! In any case, the Holy Spirit's purpose in all this was **to affirm Mary's faith once again**, as she believed and submitted to God's will and so became the mother of God's "only begotten" Son.

4. **Mary believes** (Luke 1:45).

Ponder, for a moment, **Mary's faith**. To grasp it, we must understand that faith is more than intellectual belief. Faith is belief plus trust.

Understanding this, we can discern certain aspects of Mary's faith. First, **she believed intellectually what Gabriel had said**. She believed the virgin birth was possible and that it would happen. She didn't doubt this.

Secondly, **she trusted her life to God's promises**. Thirdly, this trust produced passivity, a negation of all activity in which **she submitted to God**: "Let it be with me according to your word." And, fourthly, out of that passivity sprang renewed, energized activity as she immediately acted upon God's Word, "and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea" (NIV) to tell her cousin Elizabeth of the good news.

Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, modeled faith for the Church. Saving faith is belief plus trust that issues in proper passivity, leading to a total dependence upon God (C. H. Dodd, The Epistle to the Romans, 1960, p. 116), which then flames into activity, producing a life of service to others.

Do we believe without reservation that Jesus is God? Do we believe that he lived and died upon the cross for our sins and paid for them with his blood? Do we believe that he was resurrected and is alive among us today? Do we trust in him? Do we rest everything in life and death upon his forgiveness and grace? Do we take time to be quiet? Do we act upon God's Word? These are the marks of those who believe as Mary believed.

5. God cares.

Now there is one more thing. Do you see how **God cared for Mary** by providing Elizabeth for her? Young Mary could hear the angel Gabriel's startling announcement, but she couldn't have been expected to understand everything the words implied. Elizabeth was an older, wiser woman. She was a priest's wife. No doubt, she knew her way around the temple and the things of the Lord. She also must have known the Scriptures.

Reading between the lines, I suspect **Mary and Elizabeth must have had a real heart-to-heart conversation**. Think of the mutual encouragement and fellowship that was theirs. Both were miraculously expecting. Elizabeth was well past the nausea that might yet have lain ahead for Mary. Both their unborn babies had been announced by the same angel, Gabriel. Both their unborn sons had mutually fulfilling prophecies made about them. John would "make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (1:17). Imagine the

women's exchange! No doubt they speculated over what the Scriptures meant. I think they would also have prayed together. They would have become "sisters" in shared experience as well as in soul. In fact, I suspect, if there had been telephone communication, after their visit they would have burned up the wires!

At such times **reality is like a dream come true**. Grandmotherly Elizabeth, great with child, her age lines erased by the fullness of pregnancy's spring, stood and sat beside the girl-virgin, ministering to her. Again, **Luci Shaw**, in another section of her poem, "Elizabeth prophecies":

Veined hands locked
with smooth.
Close breaths.
Resonance
of soul.

Life was filled with expectancy, much as it is for those who first experience the life of Jesus Christ within.

The Visitation of Mary with Elizabeth is flesh-and-blood history about **God's care for the Virgin Mary**. It is about how God directed her to a community of faith in the humble home of Elizabeth and Zechariah, where she was linked with people of mutual belief, mutual experiences and mutual hope. The Visitation records how Mary's life within was affirmed, and how her faith was confirmed, celebrated and strengthened. **God took care of Mary as he takes care of us**.

So, let us like Mary, come to the community of faith because it is here that we experience elevation through our mutual hope in the ultimate fulfillment of our own new birth, as the Apostle John so memorably explained:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. Beloved we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure (1 Jn. 3:1a, 2-3).

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