

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Luke 1:38

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord.

May it be done to me according to your word.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Luke 1:39-45; L12C

Mary set out

**and traveled to the hill
country in haste
to a town of Judah,
where she entered the
house of Zechariah
and greeted Elizabeth.**

**When Elizabeth heard
Mary's greeting,
the infant leaped in her
womb,
and Elizabeth, filled with
the Holy Spirit,
cried out in a loud voice
and said,
"Blessed are you among
women,
and blessed is the fruit of your
womb.**

**And how does this happen to me,
that the mother of my Lord should
come to me?**

**For at the moment the sound of your
greeting reached my ears,
the infant in my womb leaped for joy.**

**Blessed are you who believed
that what was spoken to you by the
Lord
would be fulfilled."**



Reflecting on the Gospel

The large mysteries of the first three weeks of Advent converge this Sunday into the truth that the Christ who will rule the cosmos was once carried in the small world of Mary's womb. John the Baptist, whose strong voice we heard on the Jordan riverbank last week, today has no voice and can only announce the good news of Jesus's equally silent advent by an exultant leap of joy in Elizabeth's womb. There are no crowds pressing forward, asking questions. There are only two pregnant women as the first and most intimate audience for the meeting of the Messiah with his precursor, and the one question Elizabeth asks of Mary is: "How does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

As the ark of the covenant was being taken up to Jerusalem, David danced before it in joyful reverence for the sacred artifacts of Israel it contained (2 Sam 6:14-15). John now dances before Mary, the new "ark" of a new covenant, sealed in the flesh and blood of the child she carries in her womb—the most holy possession of Israel. When the six-month-old baby leaps in Elizabeth's womb, she too becomes a prophet. Filled with the Holy Spirit, she reads the signs of the times, the "something more" of an ordinary human event—the stirring of the child in her womb—and proclaims the blessedness that God has bestowed on Mary and the One she carries.

The Advent mystery tells us so clearly that God has a special love for apparently unimportant people and places: for backwater Nazareth and its young woman; for the unnamed village of an old country priest and his aging wife; for the town of Bethlehem-Ephrathah which, by the time of the prophet Micah, whom we heard in the

first reading, had been eclipsed by Jerusalem in importance, even though the former was David's birthplace. The word of the Lord that came to Micah in the eighth century BCE announces that a new future awaits this town for, like a woman in labor, its pain (of neglect) will be changed when it brings forth a future king who will fulfill the dreams as yet unrealized by the Davidic lineage. The one to come will be shepherd of his flock, caring for them in the strength of the Lord and bringing peace and security. In such unimportant places and in unexpected ways, the Son of David will be born as this fulfillment of the dreams of his people. In us, too, such dreams will be fulfilled if we offer Jesus hospitality.

Do we recognize the glory of God in unimportant people and places? Or do we drop a veil over the poverty and pain that can exist not only in far-off places, but also nearby, and even in our own hearts? Some people dread the approach of Christmas. The loneliness, for example, of those suffering the pain of broken relationships or distance from loved ones is intensified by viewing the joyful companionship and family gatherings of those around them. In many places, the rates of suicide and domestic violence rise during this "season of goodwill" when not much goodwill is experienced by some people. This is a challenge to our parishes and families, and one that many Christians are meeting with great generosity and hospitality.

God has given us the most wonderful of Christmas gifts: his own Son, wrapped in our human flesh. But the whole Christ, head and members, is not yet fully formed. Until the end of the ages, he continues to wrap himself in the love and fidelity of his disciples.

Focusing the Gospel

Key words and phrases: “Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice.”

To the point: Elizabeth is so overwhelmed with joy when Mary comes to her that her body reacts in two physical ways. First, the child she’s carrying moves. If you’ve carried a child, you can imagine what that big kick may have felt like. Second, she cries out. The gospel writer is very specific with this action: she doesn’t simply “greet” or “speak,” as we may expect. Instead, she “cried out in a loud voice.” There’s a lack of inhibition in Elizabeth’s joy that is unexpected, if not jarring. She expresses loud joy at not only seeing a member of her family whom she loves, but simultaneously making the connection that her cousin is *carrying her Messiah*. That realization does not elicit demur wonder, but a vocal exclamation. Do you have a family member or friend who expresses joy in a similar way? Do you find this delightful, or does it give you some anxiety when a person greeting you “makes a scene”? Do you think Mary was overwhelmed, or ran right into her arms?

Connecting the Gospel

to the first reading: The first reading paints a picture of the coming of a grand ruler, who will “stand firm” and “shepherd his flock by the strength of the LORD.” Words like “majestic” and “greatness” suggest a ruler who is intimidating, and yet the passage ends with the declaration, “[H]e shall be peace.” The prophet Micah gives us a classic moment of biblical irony: the leader described with warrior-like words is, in fact, peace on earth.

to experience: This week’s readings are a juxtaposition of traditionally feminine and masculine imagery: In the gospel, Elizabeth has an experience directly tied to her pregnancy, and in the first reading, Micah describes a leader who is a “firm” and “majestic” shepherd. However, both passages hinge on an unexpected turn: Elizabeth cries out loudly and says exactly what she’s thinking, and Micah’s Ruler is the embodiment of peace. By pairing these two passages in this week’s liturgy, we are invited to contemplate a Messiah who speaks to the nuanced experience of both women and men.

Connecting the Responsorial Psalm

to the readings: The psalm gives us a command to use in prayer: “[L]et us see your face.” This direct ask is helpful, but what might that “face” be? The first reading describes a shepherd who is firm and majestic, and the second reading describes the body of Jesus, consecrated and offered as a “holocaust” for us. The gospel gives us an example of someone’s reaction at the anticipation of seeing the actual, physical face of Jesus, the child being carried by Elizabeth, Mary’s cousin.

to psalmist preparation: What does “the face” of Jesus look like to you? Is it what was left on Veronica’s cloth? Is it a literal rendition of the Shroud of Turin? Or could “seeing” the face of the Lord be noticing his work in your life? Think about moments of peace or triumph, grace or clarity. Let those moments map your own experience of the face of God. When you share these words, invite the congregation to seek the face of the Lord in their own lives. This week’s psalm is a petition to the Lord. Enjoy the satisfaction of asking a direct question.

PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING

When was the last time you were so filled with joy and delight that you yelled about it, loudly?

How do you express sudden joy? How do you greet people you haven’t seen in a while? What kind of greeting makes you feel most comfortable and loved?

Do you contemplate God in your personal devotion with more feminine or masculine imagery? How does this imagery inform your prayer?

What is the face of God? Do you see the face of God in your own life and work? Who shows the face of God to you?
