

Mary and Elizabeth

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston
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Two pregnant women full of spirit usher us into the season of Christmas on this last Sunday in Advent. Just after the angel Gabriel has announced to Mary that she is carrying in her womb the Son of the Lord and her, thought to be barren cousin, Elizabeth, is also with child. Mary quickly leaves and goes to visit Elizabeth and that is where we pick up the text this morning.

We see that as Mary greets Elizabeth the child in Elizabeth's womb leaps with joy. This child to be born, as we have read in earlier passages, is John the Baptist. He is already preparing the way for Jesus with his little leaps in his mother's belly. Elizabeth, so clearly, has a deep sense and awareness of God. In this encounter, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, becomes a prophetic voice to Mary, naming and affirming all that she has just heard from the angel Gabriel. Elizabeth is filled with the spirit and says to Mary, Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord. Elizabeth, with the authority of the Holy Spirit, speaks of what Mary has just heard, yet there is nothing in scripture that leads us to believe that Elizabeth knew about Mary's earlier encounter with Gabriel.

Elizabeth's words must have stirred such mixed emotions for Mary. On the one hand, she must have been relieved to hear that the words from Gabriel were real and she wasn't just imagining things. Yet on the other hand, she must have had some hesitation about what this would possibly mean for her life. A woman in these times was not safe to out of wedlock and pregnant. However, Elizabeth, prophetic in her words, comforts Mary and she moves her towards the joy, she moves her toward acceptance. And after Elizabeth has said all these words to Mary, her response, Mary's response, is one of song. One that we call The Great Magnificat. You will hear it sung this morning for our anthem. You just heard it as our canticle; they are doing a lovely version by Charles Stanford. Lovely, no pressure. Mary's song, full of praise and celebration, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior." Mary is fully aware, aware of being a channel of God's grace and God's action in the world. She understands herself as an instrument of God's work. A vessel, literally, of God's love for the world. Mary, like all followers of ancestor's of Abraham, has long waited to hear of the chosen one coming to bring forth the reign of God.

This is no small thing to carry this tiny child, this Son of God. Yet Mary, she answers willingly with a yes. Not timid and unsure, but with clarity and conviction her song soars. She is far from Mother mild, her Magnificat is not meek and humble, it is bold and it calls forth. It is often said to be revolutionary. Not in the popular culture sense of the latest music CD that is being revolutionary to the music industry, but rather a more intense, real, not overused understanding of the word, revolution. Revolution meaning to

change something, or to leave it. To reverse it to what has been or ultimately to lead to the upheaval of the powers that be. Revolution as the call for social change. Mary names this so clearly in her song. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich empty away. There is a risk for her, she was the lowly and to speak such words could cost Mary her life. Yet, Mary speaks her words of truth and becomes, many would argue, the very first disciple of the Good News. Our first evangelist, you might say. However, Mary's song is not about a vengeful, angry God. It's more about a God for all people, not just the few chosen elite, but for all. Her song is about a God that will liberate all those who have been pushed down, or left out, who have been marginalized by any powers that be. It is an Advent song of hope of the change to come. A song of a new way of life, her words are about mercy and justice, and they are about compassion and hope for everyone.

As one scholar states, the overthrow of the powerful has not come about through the mounting up of the weak in rebellion but through the coming of God and the weakness of a child. So here, this morning, we have two women before us, pregnant with new life, living out their piece of God's story of salvation. Elizabeth, showing us the power of the Spirit to give courage to Mary and see with the Holy Spirit the Good News that was growing inside of Mary. She called her role in the story by helping Mary name it and rejoicing with her as she claimed it in her song. And Mary, who, encouraged by Elizabeth, sings this new song of what is to come, what this baby will bring forth for all the world. She starts the next chapter of God's work in the world with her yes. She made straight the path for God. She opened herself to God working in and through her.

Something is happening inside of these two women, new life, a new order, a new kingdom. What is happening in each of them impacts the other one and reveals for each of them more clarity of how God is working in their lives. The joy of the Spirit among them builds their awareness and confidence. It builds their trust and it affirms their faith. They needed each other to live fully into their part of this story. There's no question, that with the birth of this child, God will ask no small thing of all of us who follow the Way. But what we witness in this story this morning is the power of sharing in this faith journey with our fellow pilgrims.

Henri Nouwen, in his book *The Road to Daybreak*, states that neither Mary nor Elizabeth had to wait in isolation; they could wait together and thus deepen in each other their faith in God for Whom nothing is impossible. Thus God's most radical intervention into history was listened to and received in community. The story of Mary and Elizabeth teaches us the meaning of friendship and community. We cannot live this new life alone. God does not want to isolate us by His Grace; on the contrary, He wants us to form new friendships, in a new community. Holy places where His Grace can grow in fullness and bear fruit.

So you see God's work is ultimately about relationship, about each of us seeking God in one another, the way Mary and Elizabeth were able to do. Mary needed Elizabeth and we too, need one another to help by being one another's eyes and ears. It is in community that we are able to affirm and discern how God is living in our life. And it's in

community that we're able to hold one another accountable to what it means to live this life. It's in the connection between people that we meet our Lord.

So how might this song of Mary speak to us today? In what new ways is God moving in our individual lives? In our church community? In our work community? Perhaps, in our school community? How about in the larger city and in our country and ultimately around the world? What song is being sung in your heart and how are you saying yes with the same rejoicing of Mary? And, who are the Elizabeths in your life that offer support and help you trust that all things are indeed possible with God? Who are the people that you can name the places they see God working in you? What communities are you part of that offer a Holy place to grow in God's love and grace? What individuals and communities give you the courage to live with confidence and trust in God? And then, finally, who have you been Elizabeth for? Where have you been the voice calling people in to their faith and out into the world? Priest and scholar Herbert O'Driscoll eloquently says, "The fact of the matter is that we are all Mary, each one of us potentially a human womb in which the eternal Christ wants to be born." So on this fourth Sunday in Advent and Christmas Eve, might we spend a moment pondering all the ways Jesus has been, and will continue to be born into our life. May this season of expecting and anticipating offered to us Advent live on in our hearts throughout the entire year as we continually seek to be as Elizabeth and Mary, pregnant with the spirit of Jesus. Amen.