

## GOD WITH US

Advent 4, Year C: Micah 5:2-5a  
Psalm 80:1-7  
Luke 1:39-55

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**Key Passages:** *And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”* (Luke 1:46-48a)

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel...* (Micah 5:2a)

If Mary had been a user of social media, we might not have had today’s gospel story. Perhaps she would have updated her Facebook page or tweeted to her cousin rather than going for a visit. While those words might have been useful to us, I am grateful that we have the fuller account, because good things happen when we come together.

In our gospel today, Mary has just received the news from the angel Gabriel that she is to be the mother of Jesus. In the very next verse, Luke says that Mary hurried to another town, to see her relative Elizabeth. The angel’s words to Mary had included a message that Elizabeth, despite her advanced years and previous infertility, was also expecting a child. The reunion of these two women is called “The Visitation,” and it is a poignant picture for us to imagine. Mary, young, unwed and engaged to Joseph, has received the astounding news that she will have a child by the Holy Spirit. She greets her cousin Elizabeth, an old woman who is also carrying a miraculous child, who will be John the Baptist, the one who announces the coming of Jesus.

In their visit the two women share their news and offer each other support in the midst of these perplexing and yet joyful messages. It seems a very natural thing to do. In their encounter we see the Holy Spirit at work. Elizabeth’s child gives a healthy kick in her womb, as the unborn acknowledges the source of life and wonder. Elizabeth is moved to greet her cousin with words that continue as part of the hymn we call the Ave Maria: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” And Mary responds with the beautiful words we call the Magnificat: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!” Any of our choristers can tell you that these words are sung at every Evensong, one of the most beloved canticles of our tradition.

So these two women come together, to embrace each other, to experience confirmation of the amazing news that each of them has received, and to

support each other in what must have been unsettling and baffling news that has turned each of their lives upside down. In the midst of the joy of children, there must have also been the worries of facing questions—how can this be? For Mary, the potentially deadly stigma of having a child before marriage, for Elizabeth a baby at an age beyond child-bearing. They have both said “Yes” to God, but surely they are also feeling inadequate and unsure about what is to come.

God has chosen unlikely persons to be vessels of love and mercy, and through God’s spirit we see them surrounded by the strength and comfort of that love. The words of the prophets have been fulfilled. We read in Micah today, “And you, O Bethlehem, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth one who is to rule in Israel.” God is choosing humble people for divine favor. The one who is to rule, Jesus, is not coming from the halls of power and privilege, but from a working-class girl in a rural area. Mary’s Song makes clear that God’s promises are being fulfilled as the poor and hungry are lifted up and given the bounty that God desires for all people.

This picture of two women came to my mind in a recent story on public radio. Two women in Boston who had been friends in the past were unexpectedly reunited at Pine Street Inn, when both had become homeless. They recognized each other and renewed their relationship. After some months at the shelter, working with the staff there, they have now moved into permanent housing together, continuing to care for each other as they rebuild their lives.

We are standing on the threshold of Christmas now. We’ve worked our way through Advent, hearing the words of John the Baptist calling us to examine our lives, to see how far we have fallen short, to turn around and face the coming light of Christ. For many of us, these harsh messages have had particular poignancy as we contemplate the loss of life to violence, war, tsunami, fire, and disease. We think particularly of young people gunned down on our streets and in our schools. Friday’s *Globe* reminded us of American college students on the way home for Christmas, shot down in a plane over Scotland 30 years ago. And now we hear of miraculous birth and see two women rejoicing together as they see God at work, bringing mercy and justice into the world.

The Christmas Gospel is filled with images of the birth of the baby. Perhaps this year, as we celebrate with our own families and gaze into the eyes of the children who surround us here, our thoughts turn to empty homes in Boston, Parkland, Guatemala, Syria, and everywhere that young lives are taken away violently. And we think of families torn apart by disease, poverty, and cruelty, and people who have never been able to have children. There is no calculus of grief here. There is no way to compare the pain. It is only to be grasped, endured, and put in God’s merciful hands.

Sometimes Christmas has been hard for me personally, because there is such an emphasis on children. My husband and I tried unsuccessfully for ten years to conceive a child. So I know a little bit of the sadness that fills many hearts in homes with empty rooms and beds. And I pray for God's compassion on all who suffer, especially at this time of year.

Our observances of Christmas may have so sentimentalized the nativity stories that we have lost the real picture. For Mary and Elizabeth, miraculous births are joyful news. And complicated for each of them. We who know how the story unfolds, realize that each of them will lose their sons to horrific deaths. It's a powerful reminder that the good news of the Gospel comes to us in the midst of the complexities of our lives. Most of us do not live in ideal "Hallmark moment" families. The true joy of Christmas is not in a cute baby, but in God's unfailing love for us.

Some years ago (before I became a priest), I was on pilgrimage at Canterbury Cathedral in England. I devoted a day to praying in all the various chapels that ring the High Altar and fill the Undercroft of that huge building. I spent the most time in a small chapel where the major decoration was an icon of the Annunciation, a depiction of the angel telling Mary that she will be the mother of Jesus. It was a moving time for me, to place again before God all of the sadness that I felt in being childless and widowed. I think I was there for quite some time, gazing at the images and trying to pray. And the words that came to me were these: "I didn't bring you all this way to abandon you now."

I am not claiming that I had a vision, nor am I by any means equating myself with Mary, the Mother of God. I simply felt a sense of peace in God's presence, a presence that is promised to us in all of Scripture, and especially in the coming of Jesus as Emmanuel, God-with-us. And I believe that God's unfolding promise brought me here six years ago to be part of this family. You have reached out to me as your priest, and you have invited me into your lives. Together we try to hear God's messages, God's promises for us as part of Christ's family. We gather here to pray, to sing, to read, to learn, and to receive the sacraments. Like Mary and Elizabeth we want to be with each other, to support and comfort and weep and rejoice in this place. My friends, God never abandons us. That is the promise of Emmanuel. That is Christmas.

We have prayed earnestly, "Come quickly, Lord Christ; Come quickly and save us." Save us from our blindness, our greed, our racism, our addiction to violence, our fear, our despair, our failure to love each other. We look to the manger for a sign of God's light and life to spread around the world. God has promised us a Prince of Peace. We know how desperately we need this baby to become Lord of our lives.

Christmas is about hope. It is about the promise that God is with us no matter what may happen to us. Through God's gift of Jesus we see rescuing love most

completely expressed. God has entered into the depths of our lives. God is searching us out and bringing us home.

In the words of poet Madeleine L'Engle:

We cannot wait till the world is sane,  
to raise our songs with joyful voice,  
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,  
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!