

Advent 4 C: Luke 1:5-56 December 23, 2018 Church of the Redeemer David Schlafer

1) The gaps between these two women—they are so many, and so wide.

- One is an elder, the other little more than a child.
 - Age can bring an uneasy balance of wisdom and skepticism.
 - Youth is often a drama of naivete and impulse.
 - It can be hard for old and young to hear each other.
- One of these women is relatively privileged, the other . . . not so much.
 - With higher social status come more opportunities for learning and for leisure.
 - If you're low on the social scale, those can be luxuries you just can't afford.
 - Possibilities abound for misunderstanding between those better and worse off.
- One has been long-married, the other is but recently engaged.
- The husband of one gets to serve as a priest.
The other's fiancé is a wood construction worker

We could go on; but the point is clear: Granted their respective statuses and histories, they've little chance of making close connection.

2) Indeed, so wide and so many are the gaps; it's hard to imagine factors that could bridge them. But there are similarities beneath the surface differences that separate these two.

Those MIGHT help to bring the two together—OR drive them further apart.

- Both are relatives—they're bound by blood.
- Both are women coping as best they can in a patriarchal culture.
- Both live under the thumb of political oppression, enforced by an occupying alien army.
Yet they also share a tradition that has seen, and still seeks Divine Deliverance.
- And there is that one other similarity, isn't there?
Both are, as the saying goes, "in a family way"—
 - under circumstances that, while different for each, are still—well—"highly unusual"
 - circumstances that attract unfavorable attention.
 - Whispers will surround the one: *Well, it's ABOUT TIME!*
 - Whispers will surround the other: *Well, this is UNTIMELY!*
 - Being similarly shamed could BOND the two—or ISOLATE them more.

**3) Truth be told, however, both the formidable BARRIERS to their relationship, and the factors that might—or might not—function as BRIDGES between them—
any careful observer could note them all every one.**

Yet these two women, Elizabeth and Mary—they have another similarity—
of which each—alone—has firsthand knowledge—
about which no outside observer could have a clue.

In ways distinctive but analogous, both Mary and Elizabeth are Bearers of Divine Possibility.
And they are brought together by an unexpected, most unlikely Third Party
who shows up to announce the news of this Possibility that seems so improbable.
The messenger comes first to Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah; and then to Mary herself.

How can these things be? That is the question each puts to Gabriel the Angel.

To Zechariah, the angel answers, in effect: *You shouldn't HAVE to ask.*

As a priest, you should know the tradition, and welcome this advent of Divine Intervention.

Therefore, you will lose your voice for a season, so maybe your wife can find her own.

To Mary, Gabriel says, in effect: *I know how hard this must be for you to wrap your mind around.*

So why don't you check it out with your relative Elizabeth?

She doesn't know EXACTLY how you feel; but she HAS a feel for what you're going through.

It could just be that EACH of you will help the other find their voice.

And Mary, who, in response to the angel, can barely manage: *Well, OK—just as you say.*

Morning sickness notwithstanding—makes haste to the hill country.

She undertakes a solitary, fast-paced, long hard road trip to see Elizabeth.

They meet—they engage—they connect.

Each feels they need to tell someone whom they can trust—and each takes the risk to do so.

Based on her OWN experience, Elizabeth finds her voice in validating MARY's experience.

And Mary's coming to visit HER further confirms ELIZABETH'S experience.

What could be an occasion of jealousy for either or for both, becomes the opposite.

Each, having been blessed by God, blesses the other.

And—up to this point essentially inarticulate—Mary breaks out, at last, in poetry and song:

MY soul proclaims the greatness of the LORD/And my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior,

From henceforth, ALL generations will call ME "blessed"

AND He has mercy on ALL those who fear him FROM generation TO generation.

4) This encounter between two vulnerable women who both need and empower each other.

It isn't restricted to a brief, emotional one-off event.

For weeks and weeks, Zechariah the priest is mute—utterly incapable of uttering a single word.

(That's not a PUNISHMENT, incidentally; it is a GIFT to Zechariah.)

No mansplaning remotely possible for him; THIS man gets to LISTEN to WOMEN for a change.)

For weeks and weeks Mary and Elizabeth go back and forth, weaving God-talk and women-talk.

One creative insight sparking another about what God the creator

HAS done, IS doing, WILL do through each and both of them.

Gaps between them close up. Barriers between them come down.

And all the while, within them, they incubate the lives of two little boy children, Jesus and John, whom, after laboring to birth, they will nurture into men—

men who will PROCLAIM God's word in one case, PROCLAIM and BE God's Word in the other.

In this drama of Divine Possibility, one could say it is a case of *Like Mothers, Like Sons*.

For—following in their mothers' footsteps,

these two young men, John and Jesus, will challenge the structure of class and clan,

defy the givens of tyranny and patriarchy, reach across the gaps of gender and age,

and assail the structural bulwarks of social animosity and alienation.

Just as Mary sings: these two young men will, as God's Good News bringers: *scatter the proud, cast down the mighty, fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich empty away.*

And all that because two women, with so LITTLE in common and so MUCH—

these two women embrace the prospect of BEING embraced by Divine Possibility.

And, through their bodies and their souls, they release that Possibility.

They send Divine Possibility forth into the world—

Each upholding the other in Letting it BE, according to God's word.

Oh yes—and both sons will share the vulnerability of their mothers,

a vulnerability that will become a means and a manifestation of Divine strength.

5) Male or female, old or young, whatever your social position or vocational role may be—
some questions for us all:

- When have we been helped to find our voices by someone like Mary or Elizabeth?
- Whom have we been able to nurture others as an Elizabeth or a Mary?
- How and where has an unlikely messenger upended our lives,
challenging us with the prospect of serving as the bearer of Divine Possibility?

To be more specific:

- When blocked by formidable social barriers, what bridges have been provided for us?
- In the yawning gap of social distance, how have we tried
to level the mountains, fill in the valleys, thereby preparing the Way of the Lord?
- How have our own vulnerabilities become occasions for Divine strength?
- What have been, or might be ways for us to find and share our voices to sing Good News?
- What might our role be—in concert with others, each vulnerable, but strong together—
how might we serve as God's hands and voice to *scatter the proud, cast down the mighty,
fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich empty away?*

On this final Sunday in the Season of Anticipation, we give thanks for Elizabeth and Mary,
who, having opened themselves wide to God and to each other,
show us how *every heart can prepare Him room,*
show us how to find and blend our voices so that *heaven and nature sing.*