

Our story today began with the phrase, “In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God...” If we were to read the Gospel of Luke from the beginning of the chapter, we would have heard of a previous visit by the angel-messenger Gabriel who told good news to Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were a couple that was much too old to have children and yet through Gabriel, God promised they would indeed have a child of their own and they are to name him John, a name that means *God has shown favor*. And certainly as we heard earlier, God does have more favor to be shown. This time Gabriel is again sent by God but it is to an out-of-the-way place, a town in Galilee called Nazareth. And our Gospel writer wants us to be sure we don’t miss the miraculous activity that God is about to undertake. We are told Gabriel is sent to a young virgin who is engaged to a man named Joseph and (in case you missed it the first time) *the virgin’s* name was Mary.

Gabriel begins in a way that is somewhat comforting, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” But even so, we are told that Mary is much perplexed by his words. And who can blame her? As we can only imagine, any angelic revelation would be incredibly shocking. Gabriel again attempts to stress that God has good news for her by saying, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” And without so much as skipping a beat, he goes on to tell Mary that she will conceive and have a child and that his name would be Jesus, which means, God saves. And that her child will be great, he will be called the Son of the Most High, he will inherit the throne of his ancestor David, he will reign forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end!”

And with that, Mary, whom you just have to love because she is so down-to-earth and authentic and real has just one small concern, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” See, even as young as Mary is, she clearly knows something about how babies come into the world and she also knows that she is only betrothed and this could clearly lead to a scandal for her family-to-be. But, apparently, God has thought of this and so Gabriel tells her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will

overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy — for nothing will be impossible with God.”

There’s a beautiful truth to those words, am I right? God is with Mary. God looks with favor upon Mary. God can do the impossible through Mary. These kinds of assurances are also promised to each of us. Now to Mary’s credit, her response to these incredible words is very different from most all of the other call stories in the bible. She doesn’t make excuses or doubt God or laugh at this plan or try to flee from God. From what we know, she only says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” One commentator put this in a way that I like very much. He wrote, “Mary places her trust in Gabriel’s words and thus in God’s ‘with-ness’ in her life and into the future.” Gabriel says, “for nothing *will be* impossible with God.” This scene ends with “Then the angel departed from her.” Clearly, though, that promise of God’s “with-ness” continues as sure as sure can be.

In the next scene, we hear how “In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country.” From Gabriel himself Mary had heard that God was making the impossible possible, namely, that her relative Elizabeth was also going to bear a child so she hurries off to make a visit to an out-of-the-way town in Judah. While Mary had received the words of the angel wholeheartedly, even so, we can imagine she may have needed some type of confirmation of her news. Who else would believe her incredible story except for someone who had a story much like her own? So off she goes and enters the house of Zechariah (whose name means “the Lord remembers”) and she greets Elizabeth (whose name means “consecrated to the Lord”). And what happens upon Mary’s greeting of Elizabeth is the first child in the womb greets the other. It’s quite a lovely detail. The word in the Greek suggests joy, like the child skipped much like a calf or a lamb might. Unfortunately, we think of the movement of a baby in the womb as kicking, but perhaps we should change that to call it leaping or skipping or

dancing. In any case, the unborn child John, seems thrilled to have an encounter with the unborn child Jesus.

But the activity of the Holy Spirit is far from over. Next we hear that Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, fulfilling the words from the angel Gabriel that were told to Zechariah earlier in this chapter. The prophecy was about John, that “even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.” It’s as though young Mary’s being overshadowed by the power of the Most High is so great that its spilling out onto everyone with whom she encounters. At Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth and John have the Spirit poured onto them so lavishly that Elizabeth exclaims, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” A two-phase blessing is required in this instance; first, for Mary as being a unique object of praise. No woman could be as honored as Mary.

Now if Mary hadn’t yet caught the fullness of what Gabriel had said to her before, her cousin was certainly helping her in that regard. Because in the second part of Elizabeth’s blessing, she says, “and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Elizabeth is exclaiming how Mary’s child Jesus will receive such tremendous honors and favors from God that people will adore and praise God for being so lavish. This is something of a foreshadowing of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem when he rode in on the donkey. We hear that “they began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, saying, ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!’” You might also recognize these words as part of our Holy Communion liturgy as we sing, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” When do we sing these words? As we are about to welcome Christ into our worship in the most profound way, in the bread and the wine, which we accept as the gift of his body and blood. God’s gift of Jesus is absolutely lavish and wonderful.

But let’s return now to the story; just after Elizabeth’s cry of joy, she kind of freaks out for a second. She suddenly wonders, “Why has this happened to me?” Coming

face to face with Mary, Elizabeth thinks how unworthy she is to be so fortunate. In an instant, she goes from being overjoyed to a moment of fear as she recognizes she is standing in the presence of the holy. In her own “Goodness gracious!” moment, she joins with her unborn child John and recognizes the superiority of Jesus. Filled as Elizabeth is by the Holy Spirit, she puts it together — the sound of Mary’s greeting, causing the child in her womb to leap for joy, it is clear how much her younger relative Mary is blessed. But here the Greek word for blessed is different than before, here Elizabeth is calling Mary *makaria*, (no, not macarena). *Makaria* means “fortunate” or “happy.”

Now while in our reading we have this beautiful coming together of two mothers who have so much to celebrate, I want to us to pause for a moment while we think about and lift up to God so many other mothers (and fathers) who would like to, but are not able to have children... And let us also offer our silent prayers for all those who are experiencing tremendous grief and loss this season. For mothers and fathers and grandparents who have had their children’s lives torn away from them — by gun violence on our streets, by war, by disease, or any number of other unspeakable tragedies...

Yet through it all, we continue to know we have a God that always comes down. God promises “with-ness” in our times and places of joy and in times and places of pain. In Jesus, God chose to become incarnate for us, so that there would be no pain or suffering that is not redeemed. Our reading today ends with the older, wiser Elizabeth offering one more blessing for Mary saying, “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” And, we can also say confidently, “Blessed are you when you believe that there will be a fulfillment of what God has spoken to you.” God’s plan is that in Jesus Christ you will always know of God’s with-ness. And that Jesus will be your Savior—your light that shines in the darkness, and no matter what, the darkness cannot overcome him. Amen

Narrative.3.2 — Luke 1:26-45

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