

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 23, 2018
Fourth Sunday of Advent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Micah 5:2-4;
Psalm 80:1-7
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-56

Today, on the last Sunday before Christmas, our Gospel lesson shines the spotlight on two remarkable women: Mary and her cousin, Elizabeth. One woman finds herself pregnant, it would seem, *too late* in life, and the other woman finds herself pregnant, it would seem, *too early* in life.

You have heard me say many times this year how important the Old Testament is for understanding what we encounter in the New Testament. Today's Gospel account of this encounter between Mary and Elizabeth is a stellar example of what I mean. The way Luke tells the story, and the very words he uses, are taken directly from the Old Testament. And by telling the story the way he does, Luke says something very important about both Jesus *and* Mary.

Just prior to our Gospel lesson, the angel Gabriel has announced to Mary that she will become pregnant and give birth to the Messiah. As today's lesson begins, we are told that Mary sets off "in haste" to visit Elizabeth.

Scholars believe that Elizabeth and Zechariah lived in a village about five miles from Jerusalem, which would have been convenient for Zechariah to fulfill his duties serving in the temple.

But Mary is in Nazareth, almost 90 miles away! Depending on the route, it would take several days to get there. It's no wonder, then, that Mary doesn't waste any time. She sets out on her journey immediately. And there is no mention of Joseph going with her.

But there is perhaps another reason that Mary goes quickly to visit Elizabeth. I read once that the two most important days of your life are the day you are born, and the day you discover *why* you are born. With all that has just happened to Mary, she has discovered the *why* of her life. She has accepted her role in a great drama where *God* is writing the script.

When Mary arrives and greets Elizabeth, Luke tells us that Elizabeth's child "leaped within her, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit." The witness of the Spirit in Elizabeth then empowers her to say to Mary: "You are blessed by God *above all other women*, and your child is blessed."

Luke uses two different words to describe how Mary is "blessed." In one case he uses a word that emphasizes that both present and future generations will praise Mary and speak well of her. And in the other case he uses the word from the beatitudes that means "happy."

Mary is blessed, then, because her social status has been reversed. *She will be honored rather than shamed for bearing this child.* And she is blessed because she has been given divine joy and happiness for believing that God is able to do what He promises.

Elizabeth then asks an intriguing question, a question that begins to take us back to the Old Testament foundation of this encounter. She asks: *“How is it that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?”*

Elizabeth’s question is almost a direct echo of King David’s question when he is told to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. This story is found in 2 Samuel 6 and following. David asks, *“How can the Ark of the Lord come to me?”*

To refresh our memories, we need to remember what the Ark of the Covenant was. The Ark was a chest made of acacia wood, overlaid both within and without with the purest gold. The cover of the Ark was also made of pure gold. On the top of the Ark were placed two Cherubim made of gold, facing each other and spreading their wings so that the top of the Ark was covered.

God had commanded Moses to build the Ark at Mount Sinai, after the people had left Egypt. But what made the Ark so holy was what was inside of it. Inside of this golden box were the *two tablets* on which God had written the Ten Commandments. In addition, there was *manna*, the miracle bread sent by God to feed His people in the wilderness. And finally, there was the *priestly rod* of Aaron.

Now, as Luke tells the story of Mary and Elizabeth, he does so with uncanny similarity to the story of David bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem in 2 Samuel. In many cases, the language is almost identical.

For starters, Luke says that Mary “arose and went” to the hill country of Judah. In 2 Samuel the text says that David “arose and went” to a village in Judah to retrieve the Ark.

Luke tells us that Mary enters Zechariah’s “house,” and 2 Samuel tells us that the Ark enters the “house” of Obed-edom.

Luke tells us that the infant John “leaped for joy” in Elizabeth’s womb at Mary’s greeting. Similarly, 2 Samuel tells us that David “danced with joy” before the Ark, and the words “danced” and “leaped” are the same word in the Greek Old Testament.

Finally, Luke tells us that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months. And 2 Samuel tells us that the Ark of the Covenant remained in the house of Obed-Edom for three months until David brought it up to Jerusalem. (Cf. 2 Sam. 6:11).

As Luke tells this story, then, he clearly has in mind the story of David bringing the Ark of the Covenant up to Jerusalem in the Old Testament. The question is: Why? What is Luke attempting to say?

I think that what Luke is trying to say is that Mary is a “new” Ark. Mary is the Ark of the *New Covenant*. Where the first Ark contained the Word of God in stone, Mary’s body contains the Word of God enfleshed.

Where the first Ark contained miraculous bread from heaven, Mary’s body contains the very Bread of Life that conquers death forever.

Where the first Ark contained the rod of the long-ago ancestral priest Aaron, Mary’s body contains the divine person of the *eternal* Priest, Jesus Christ.

Whatever made the first Ark holy made Mary even holier. This is why Elizabeth can say, “Blessed are you among women.” And it’s why Mary can sing the *Magnificat* and say, “Henceforth, all generations shall call me blessed.”

The two most important days of your life are the day you are born, and the day you discover *why*. Mary had discovered her *why*. But she did not merely discover her *why* in the sense of choosing it. She discovered her purpose by humbly submitting to something that had been *chosen for her*.

Enuma Okoro says it this way: *Openness to God demands our growing acceptance that we cannot create blueprints for our own lives.*

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, one of the greatest ways we can prepare for Christ’s coming is to adopt the attitude of Elizabeth and Mary. To give God complete control of our lives. To willingly accept the part God has chosen for us, rather than demanding to play the lead.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, I invite you to come with faith. Come with the faith of Elizabeth and Mary, the faith that trusts that God knows what He is doing. Place your lives in His hands and say with them: "Be it unto me according to your will."

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.