

C Advent 4 12.22.24

Luke 1:39-45

Focus Statement: God shows us God's promise in each other.

This morning's Gospel text gives us a meeting between Mary and Elizabeth. While these are two giants in our scriptural imagination, it's worth taking some time this morning to remember their backstories. Because while they are giants to us, they were anything but in their own time and place. So let's review the first thirty-eight verses of Luke's Gospel, and remember what happened that got us to this morning.

After some introductory bragging by the writer of Luke's Gospel, the Gospel opens in verse five with how, "In the days of King Herod of Judea"—King Herod of Judea, heads up, was the father of "Herod the ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis" from the introduction of John the Baptist two weeks ago. "In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah." The text tells us that Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were both "righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord." They were, in other words, good and faithful people. Yet, despite their faithfulness, they were unable to have children. This would have been quite the deal in the first century, where children were a sign of God's favor. That is until one day, after they were, and I quote scripture directly here, "both getting on in years," Zechariah was fulfilling his priestly responsibilities in the Temple, when an angel of the Lord appeared before him, declaring that they were to have a son. Zechariah was frightened of the angel, but still had his wits about him enough to be questionable, asking, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." Pro tip right here friends, never question an angel. Because here was the angel responded,

in no uncertain terms, “I am Gabriel, I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. [Pause]. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.” And with that, calling himself an old man became the last words Zechariah would speak for the next nine months. He came out of the Temple unable to speak, and when he went home, “his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion.”

So that’s Elizabeth. Next we meet Mary, because “in the sixth month” [of Elizabeth’s pregnancy] the text tells us, our friend Gabriel shows up again. This time Gabriel “was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.” While there are many similarities to the angel’s appearance to Zechariah and Mary, there are also some glaring differences. One an answer to fervent prayer, the other entirely unanticipated. One to a couple past the end of the childbearing spectrum, another to a couple very much before it. Both boys “would be great,” one because “he will turn many of the people of Israel...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” The other, because he “will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”

But even though the angel assured the women that both boys “would be great,” that would not have changed their societal experiences of being very much alone. Elizabeth too old, Mary too young. Elizabeth too long married without children; Mary too unmarried. Both would have experienced the judgmental glances of those around them, with the sign of

their condition very visible for all to see. So, the angel said something to Mary that I find so beautiful. After announcing Jesus, he told her of Elizabeth, how “in her old age [she] has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” In so many words, the angel said to Mary, you are not alone in this experience. Your relative Elizabeth is also pregnant. If you go to her, then on the days you doubt the promise, you can look to her and see God working in her life. And she can look to you and see God working in you. One to another, you can be for each other the mutual assurance of the promises of God in each other.

Dear people of God, this is why we gather together in worship and fellowship, this is why we do this work together, because God recognizes that we need the reminder of God’s work in each other. I don’t know about you, but it can be hard sometimes for me to feel how God is at work in my own life. To see how my actions do anything to bring about the kingdom of God. But I can see God’s work in you. I can see through you the moving of the Spirit, the promise of Jesus, the unfolding presence of the kingdom of God. I can see reflected in you the work God is doing in my life, and you reflecting God’s love in each other. Mary and Elizabeth came together so that in each other they could see the visible sign of the miracle God was performing within themselves. So that they could see in each other the lived-out promise God had made to them. God knew, God knows, it can be hard to trust the promise of our own lives, so God gave them, gave us, one to another.

That’s part of what’s happening here, this opportunity to see in another that which we might not trust in ourselves, the visible proof of God’s working in the world through the

experience of another. But there's even more of a gift than that. I read a commentary this week by the Rev. Dr. Abraham Smith, who described what happens in Luke's Gospel as a "contagion of praise." Dr. Smith reflected that we often think of "contagion" as a negative thing, but depending on what is being passed, it can also be positive. What is contagious in the Lukan Advent story is the vitality and hope of the promise of God.

And that "contagion of praise" stretches well beyond this story through the whole of the Gospel. Dr. Smith traced it on from this meeting of Mary and Elizabeth, through to when Elizabeth gave birth, and her neighbors and relatives rejoiced with her in the great mercy God showed her. Then Zechariah, his voice returned to him, blessed God for remembering God's covenant, sworn to Abraham. A covenant that Abraham's family would be blessed to be a blessing for all people. In a few days we will hear of the birth of Mary's child, for whom a heavenly host will praise God for the birth of a Savior. That contagion of praise, wrote Dr. Smith, "will move from angels to the shepherds who glorify God for all they have heard and seen (2:20). Simeon will praise God for the child Jesus (2:27-28), and so will prayerful Anna (2:38)." Dr. Smith stopped there, but we can go on. John the Baptist will praise God in his preparation, the disciples will praise with their response to God's call, all who encounter Jesus in his healing, teaching, and preaching will praise. Crowds will shout Hosanna as he enters Jerusalem. And on the cross, the most unexpected shout of praise, Jesus' own body, given up in the promise of resurrection, and declared in the words of the centurion, "certainly this man was God's Son." From the cross to the tomb to the emptiness of the tomb, and the women's rushed declaration to the disciples. To the giving of peace, to Jesus ascension into heaven, to the coming of the Spirit, so that each in their own language could

hear and give praise to God's deeds of power. And on and on, we could unfold the story, to us, today, singing and praying and praising God in our own lives and places.

The story of salvation, a praise begun before the world began, when the voice of God first moved over the waters, a praise that will long outlast the universe when Christ comes again. Today he hear how this powerful message was continued from one form to another, "with two women: Elizabeth, who praises God for what God has done (1:25), and Mary, who praises God for what the Mighty One did (1:49) in her life."

And so, asked Dr. Smith, and I find myself asking as well. "With whom will the contagion of praise begin in our own communities? Why wait for someone else to start it?" Thanks be to God, who gives us one to another, and who fills us with praise. Amen.