

**4th Sunday of Advent
December 20, 2009
10 am Liturgy**

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The second great prophet, or seer, of the Lord's coming is re-introduced at today's liturgy for the fourth Sunday of Advent. It is, of course, one who really needs no introduction; it is Miriam of Nazareth, or Mary, the mother of Jesus. But what is actually described in St. Luke's gospel is stranger and more blunt than what some piety has allowed down through the centuries.

Fresh from her conversation with the angel, we are told by the gospel that Mary "went with haste into the hill country" to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth. And in this extraordinary tableau, both women are "filled with the Holy Spirit," and burst into glorious speech. Elizabeth salutes Mary (today's gospel account); Mary in turn sings out a prophetic song of praise to God (known as the Magnificat).

Though we only hear the first half of the song in today's reading, the broader context of this extraordinary visitation invites comment. (In the interests of full disclosure and the protection of intellectual property—we are sitting next to a University campus—I tell you I am borrowing shamelessly and with enormous gratitude from Elizabeth Johnson's magnificent work *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*.)

A few contextual notes often get overlooked. When these two women first encounter each other it is in Zechariah's house. But he is dumb and nowhere to be seen. Why is this unusual? Because they are alone. There is no male voice. Johnson points out that "such quieting of the male voice is highly unusual in scripture." There is just silence first, and then there is "a rare biblical vignette of a conversation between two women."

Again Johnson says: "Into this spacious silence two women's voices resound, one praising the other and both praising God." Another curious aside: when Mary does speak her reply to Elizabeth, that Magnificat song, it becomes "the longest passage put on the lips of any female speaker in the New Testament, this is the most any woman gets to say." But it's worth the wait!

Another interesting aside: Luke tells us that both of them were filled with the Holy Spirit. Yet unlike so many other outpourings of the Spirit, this one takes place not in the synagogue, not in the Temple, not in any important gathering place (as did so many other revelatory moments in Israel's history). This takes place in a traditionally female domestic space. They are probably meeting in the kitchen! Where else would they gather? Even today.

They are also doing what women have done for centuries and down to our own day. They need each other. They need to explore the feelings and

puzzles of their new experiences. Elizabeth has to deal with her “unexpected blessing,” having resigned herself to living with disappointment at being barren. And Mary has to talk to someone about her even stranger “blessing,” one that seemed to cause more problems than it solved. How to explain this to Joseph? What to do about the gossip? And so on. As Johnson phrases it: “Each needed to talk with another woman who knew what it meant to grapple with God’s intentions.” “Together they chart the changes taking place in their bodies and affirm the grace in their own and each others’ lives.”

These two women are the great prophets of God’s Promise to Israel. They know and believe and together “beat the drum of God’s world revolution.” Now I know we don’t ordinarily think of two women—let alone two pregnant women—as great prophets. A pregnant woman is not the usual image that comes to mind. Isaiah or Jeremiah we are much more used to. Yet here are two “spirit-filled pregnant prophets crying out in joy, warning, and hope for the future.”

St. Luke draws on the rich Old Testament portraits of the barren matriarchs to describe Elizabeth. Women such as Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Hannah, and even the symbol of the barren Jerusalem. Elizabeth blesses Mary in the ancient tradition: she blesses her first as a woman in her own

right, then her child, and then her faith. And she sets the stage for Mary's revolutionary song in which the lowly will be raised, the powers of this world judged and overthrown, and the poor will finally inherit their promised kingdom.

“Clearly this is a picture of Mary that is the complete opposite of the passive, humble handmaid of the patriarchal imagination.” Nor is Elizabeth the simple, old crone that much Renaissance art portraits. These are two of the strongest, most joy-filled revolutionaries either Covenant will ever know!

While the next few days will be filled with gentle pastels and soft, warm and fuzzy images of Christmas, remember today we celebrate an Incarnation with teeth. The long awaited Promise of our God is here! And it does and will make a difference in our worlds. The second great prophet of Advent, Mary of Nazareth, does not, of course, simply exit stage left. It is as much her “Yes” we remember this week as it is her son's birth.

So let us echo Elizabeth's greeting in our own hearts, and give thanks for the great courage and faith of these two great women prophets of Advent.

“Hail, O highly favored one! The Lord is [truly] with you.” Pray for us—both of you!