

4th Sunday in Advent – Year C

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The Visitation | Giotto | Lower Church of the Basilica of St. Francis | Assisi, Italy | PD-US

The Season of Advent offers us readings that begin with apocalyptic scenes of Jesus’ prediction of the coming destruction of the Temple and the signs of “end times.” It is a gospel taken from Holy Week and seemed a bit out of place in Advent. But one message of the readings was “pay attention” for the signs of a promised age to come. The Season of Advent is a season in preparation of the “three comings of Christ” - in history past with his birth in Bethlehem, in history future at his second coming, and in the present at our reception of Him into our hearts. The gospels for Advent have moved us from the promise of a Messiah to the herald’s ministry of announcing his arrival via John the Baptist in the readings from the 2nd and 3rd Sundays of Advent. We then come to the 4th Sunday of Advent.

The gospels for the 4th Sunday of Advent tell of the events that preceded and prepared for the birth of Jesus. We will either hear about the dreams of Joseph (*Matthew*), the Annunciation in Year B (*Luke*), or the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth (also in *Luke*). This year we hear the Annunciation proclaimed along with a reading from the *Book of Micah*:

¹ But you, Bethlehem-Ephrathah too small to be among the clans of Judah, From you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; Whose origin is from of old, from ancient times. ²(Therefore the Lord will give them up, until the time when she who is to give birth has borne, And the rest of his brethren shall return to the children of Israel.) ³He

shall stand firm and shepherd his flock by the strength of the LORD, in the majestic name of the LORD, his God; And they shall remain, for now his greatness shall reach to the ends of the earth; ⁴he shall be peace. (Micah 5:1-4a)

When the magi from the East come to Jerusalem expecting to find the king of the Jews, King Herod's scribes quote this passage from Micah as evidence that the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem.

Bethlehem has been venerated as the family home of David (1 Samuel 16:1; 17:12) and the birthplace of Jesus Christ, Son of David, since the late first century AD. So popular was the site that emperor Hadrian built a shrine to Adonis-Tamur (Phoenician patron of vegetation) on the site in order to discourage Christian pilgrims from visiting it. In the fourth century, Constantine had a basilica built on the site, and its choir, repaired by Justinian in the sixth century C.E., stands precisely over the grotto where Jesus was thought to have been born. The thousands of visitors who travel to Bethlehem each year can admire five original naves of the Constantine basilica which remain intact and have been integrated into the present structure of the Church of the Nativity.

Modern day Bethlehem is considerably more famous than it was in ancient times. As the prophet Micah attests in today's first reading, it was "*too small to be among the clans of Judah*" (the New Jerusalem Bible has "least of the clans"). Nevertheless, and in keeping with the divine *modus operandi* so evident throughout the scriptures, God chooses that which humankind regards as insignificant to work wonders. From tiny Bethlehem would come the Lord and savior of the world.

The Prophet Micah was an eighth century BC figure (and a contemporary of the prophet Isaiah). Micah prophesied during the reign of Ahaz of whom 2 Chronicles 28 records: "*He did not do what was right in the sight of the LORD as David his father had done*" - and then recounts his many sins and transgressions. Micah shared his people's disillusionment with the king but encouraged them to hope for a future, worthy messiah. Rather than tolerate the sins of the leaders the Word of the Lord came to Micah to announce that the messiah would end the corruption of the judicial system, idolatry in the Temple and inauthentic worship and establish righteousness for all.

The first reading proclaims that the promised Messiah would exercise his power and majesty as a good shepherd for his people (Micah 5:3). Those who had been scattered by the wolves of war and misfortune would be gathered together and granted peace and security under the auspices of him whose rule would extend to the ends of the earth (v.4).

The allusions to King David are clear. Bethlehem is David's birthplace. David was the "gold standard" of the kings of Israel in the biblical imagination, but by the time Micah was prophesying, David's reign was long past, "*from of old.*" In spite of the obvious allusions to David, this passage from Micah is mysterious - at least to those who first heard Micah. It would likely have been vague to difficult to know what exactly is being described, especially in verse 3. Who are the "he" and the "them" mentioned in the verse? What does it mean to "give them up"? Who is the woman in labor? And who are "his kindred"? Scholars do not agree on the answers to these questions, but it seems clear that the oracle tells of a time when a ruler, a new David, will gather the children of Israel and will rule over them in the name of the LORD, bringing them security and peace.

It may be helpful to link this passage with an earlier one in the book, Micah 4:8-10. Both passages begin with the words "*and you.*" Both passages are addressed to cities; the first to Jerusalem/Zion; the second to Bethlehem. Both passages, too, speak of a woman in labor. In 4:9-10, the "*woman*" is Zion. The labor pains she experiences are the pangs of exile, but she is promised deliverance.

In the second passage, then, perhaps the "*woman*" in question is again Zion/Jerusalem, and the "*birth*" is again a metaphor to speak of deliverance from enemies. The "*kindred*" (or, more literally,

“brothers”) who return to the children of Israel are perhaps exiles (whether the 8th century exiles of Israel, from Micah's own time, or the later sixth century Judean exiles to Babylon is not clear).

The passage is indeed mysterious. What is clear, however, is that it was understood by the Gospel writers as a messianic prophecy and has continued through the centuries to be understood as such. The “*ruler*” whose coming Micah foretells is the One whose birth we will soon celebrate: of the line of David, from Bethlehem, a king who will shepherd his flock in the power of the LORD.

What more can be said? Well, perhaps it is worth noting that this passage continues a deep-rooted biblical theme. That is, Bethlehem is one of the “little clans.” The Hebrew word might better be translated as “least” or even “insignificant.” It is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe one who is younger, or one who is lesser in social status and power.

We know this story well. Jacob, Joseph, David himself—these are the younger brothers, the ones not supposed to be chosen. In fact, biblical law commands that the older brother gets the birthright, no matter the feelings of the father (Deuteronomy 21:15-17).

And yet, it happens again and again. The youngest is chosen. Jacob gets the birthright and the blessing. Joseph is exalted over his brothers. David is overlooked until all of his brothers have been paraded before Samuel. Then, finally, he is called in from the pastures surrounding Bethlehem to stand before the prophet and be anointed king (1 Samuel 16).

The most unlikely, the most insignificant, are exalted. “*You, Bethlehem-Ephrathah too small to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; whose origin is from of old, from ancient times*” (Micah 5:2).

In the time of Jesus, Bethlehem was a backwater village. Nothing much was expected of the village or its people. And yet, in the case of Bethlehem and those who come from her, the old biblical pattern holds true: the insignificant are exalted. The tables are turned, and the most unlikely of people are instruments of God's salvation. From this insignificant little village, a young shepherd boy grows up to become the most beloved king in Israel's history. And a descendant of that king fulfills God's long-awaited promises of deliverance, not just for Israel, but for the whole world.

It is not the way of the world, this exaltation of the lowliest. But it is the way God works, over and over and over again. An insignificant village. A child born to a young unmarried girl, and that girl's song, is still heard today: “*He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones but lifted up the lowly*” (Luke 1:52). And the one who comes from that little village and that young girl becomes the one Micah proclaims as “*the one of peace*” (5:5). It is a proclamation we will soon hear echoed from the pastures surrounding Bethlehem on the eve of Jesus' birth.

Luke's Nativity Narrative

“*Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us... I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus.*” (Luke 1:1,3)

Before delving into our gospel text, it is good to recall the flow of Luke's narrative: an interweaving of the stories of births of the herald of the Messiah, John the Baptist, and the Messiah, Jesus to tell a single story of redemption. Their stories are woven together with repeated references to Gabriel, shared narrative elements and scriptural allusions, markers noting time's passage during the pregnancies, letting us know that Elizabeth and Mary's are related, and other ways in which the divine hand lies behind their pregnancies. It creates the *orderly sequence* promised to Theophilus and shown in the section titles of the New American Bible:

- Announcement of the Birth of John
- Announcement of the Birth of Jesus
- Mary visits Elizabeth

Green [93] provides us with the insight that: “On the one hand, Gabriel has promised that Mary will conceive; the realization of that promise is not reported directly (cf. v 24), but assumed in the responses to Mary’s conception by Elizabeth and Mary. Luke has thus carried us from the narrative possibility to an (implicit) event to its results. On the other hand, Gabriel anticipates the birth and names the future role of a son—a possibility made probable by the narration of the fulfillment of the sign also promised to Mary. Along with the preceding account of Elizabeth’s divinely assisted pregnancy, this leads us to anticipate the event of Jesus’ birth and responses to it, along with his future, messianic role. Hence, even as the current scene completes one narrative thread, it keeps us looking forward to the completion of another. Indeed, the current scene opens up new possibilities as it develops further the nature of Jesus’ perpetual reign with its suggestive identification of Mary’s unborn child as “my Lord” (v 43) and celebration of God’s revolutionary activity (vv 46–55).”

The Gospel

³⁹ During those days Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the holy Spirit, ⁴² cried out in a loud voice and said, “Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.” (Luke 1:39-45)

While we might not think of undertaking a journey as being that remarkable, we need to be mindful that as a young girl, Mary would not normally have left her home without accompaniment—either locally or to travel some seventy miles from Nazareth to the hill country around Jerusalem. Until her marriage, a young girl lived in the confines and security of her family home. It is also noteworthy that Mary’s journey is not in obedience to the angel, who gave no such command.

The reason for Mary’s visit to her relative Elizabeth can be found in an earlier proclamation of the Angel Gabriel: “*And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God.*” (Luke 1:36-37). And so Mary sets out.

“*During those days*” and “*in haste*” indicate the immediacy of Mary’s trip after hearing the angel’s message, Mary goes to Elizabeth presumably to confirm the angel’s word about Elizabeth’s pregnancy (1:36-37) and perhaps share in her joy. It could be understood as a sign of Mary’s faith – “I’m going to see what God has done with Elizabeth;” or a testing of the angel’s message – “I’m going to see if what the angel said about Elizabeth is true.” Perhaps it was obvious to Mary when she entered the room that what the angel had told her about Elizabeth was true. It also became obvious to Elizabeth that there was something special about Mary and the baby she was carrying. Her knowledge didn’t come from an angel, but from a kick in her womb! (Brian Stoffregen)

The Spirit

Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah, for many years, had prayed to conceive and have a child. Zechariah, a priest of Israel, was serving his round of Temple duty in Jerusalem when an angel appeared and promised that they would have a child, a son, and his son would be filled with the Holy

Spirit (Luke 1:15). The Holy Spirit becomes the agent of Jesus' conception. During the Annunciation, when Mary asks: "*How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?*" And the angel said to her in reply, "*The holy Spirit will come upon you...*" (Luke 1:34-35). Once Jesus is conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit can become active in others. When Mary arrives at the home of Elizabeth, the child in the womb, to be named John, receives the Spirit in the presence of Jesus in the womb of Mary. The Spirit fills Elizabeth. Months later the Spirit will fill Zechariah on the occasion of the birth of John the Baptist. Months after that the Spirit will fill Simeon when he encounters the child Jesus at the Purification and Dedication. This foreshadows the future glorification of Jesus, which will release the Spirit on all (Acts 2:33).

This Lukan sequence begins very simply with Elizabeth's question, "*And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?*" It recalls the words of King David when the ark of the covenant was being brought back to Jerusalem after having been captured by the Philistines: "*How can the ark of the Lord come to me?*" (2 Sam 6:9). The ark symbolized the presence of Yahweh, the God of Israel. Mary, later called the Ark of the New Covenant, sanctifies Elizabeth's home with the presence of the Lord.

This is the fulfillment of the prophecy that the angel told Zechariah about his son: "*He will be filled with the holy Spirit even from his mother's womb*" (1:15b). The unborn John is presented as recognizing something about the unborn Jesus. In fact, Martin Luther uses this event to talk about "infant faith" in an argument for infant baptism arguing that John exhibited faith in Jesus while still in the womb. Elizabeth is able to correctly interpret the movement within her because she has been filled with the Holy Spirit.

How often are we put in a position to offer a Christ-centered interpretation of events that happen? Was it just circumstances? Was God involved? Should we say, "You were sure are lucky!" or "Blessed be God!"? There is a danger in assuming that we might know what God is doing, but there is also a danger of discounting God's activities in our lives. Many times in Luke/Acts, being filled with the Spirit resulted in a speech.

- After Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, she exclaims with a loud cry (1:41).
- After Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit, he speaks a prophecy (1:67).
- At Pentecost, the apostles are filled with the Holy Spirit, they speak in other tongues (Ac 2:4)
- After Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit, he speaks (Ac 4:8)
- When the disciples are filled with the Holy Spirit, they speak the word of God boldly (Ac 4:31)
- After the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles, they speak in other tongues (Ac 10:44)

The Visitation

Elizabeth's joy at her own pregnancy after so many years of barrenness is overshadowed by the joy at Mary's visit – or rather that the unborn Lord would honor her with his presence. How wonderful it would be if we had that same attitude concerning the presence of our Lord in our gathering together, and in the Word, and in the Supper: "Blessed be God who has come to us this day." I think that too often we think of worship as our good deed of bringing ourselves to God, when, in fact, it is a time and place where God comes to us.

Several Sundays ago (the 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time) a blind man cried out to Jesus in a loud voice, "*Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!*". Similarly, Elizabeth's words are "cried out" (*anaphoneo*) with a "loud voice" (*krauge megale*) as she blesses Mary and Jesus in the womb.

“Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”⁴³ And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?⁴⁴ For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy.⁴⁵ Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.”

First Elizabeth “eulogizes” Mary and the “*fruit of her womb.*” You might think “eulogizes” is an odd choice, but literally, the word *eulogeo* means “to speak well of,” then “to praise,” then “to bless,” and finally, it can refer to deeds that bring blessings. I’m not sure how many of us would be praising or blessing a young teenage, (probably 12-14 years old,) unmarried girl whom we discover is pregnant. There is far more at play in this scene.

John’s Response

For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. The prenatal response of John the Baptist confirms God’s active role in preparing John for his mission even from the womb, fulfilling the angel Gabriel’s words to Zechariah that John would be “*filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother’s womb*” (Luke 1:15).

This prenatal experience of the Spirit, embodied in his joyful leaping, points to John’s role in the unfolding narrative. Even from the womb he prophesied, implicitly transferring the designation of “Lord” to Mary’s unborn baby, recognizing in this baby the promised coming of God. Leaping for joy seems a quite appropriate response to the advent of divine redemption. John’s joyful response echoes the joy of all creation at the coming of the Savior. Luke’s Gospel often emphasizes joy as a central response to God’s saving work, from the shepherds at Jesus’ birth (Luke 2:10) to the disciples at His resurrection (Luke 24:52). This foreshadows John’s later role as the forerunner who will prepare people’s hearts for the coming of Jesus.

Also, John’s leap acknowledges the significance of Mary as Theotokos, or “God-bearer.” Just as David danced before the Ark of the Covenant, John’s leap parallels this joyful recognition of God’s presence in Mary’s womb, signaling the sacredness of Mary’s role in carrying the Messiah.

Elizabeth’s Greeting

Elizabeth’s greeting and blessing of Mary is rich in biblical significance. When Mary arrives, Elizabeth is “*filled with the Holy Spirit,*” and she exclaims, “*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!*” (Luke 1:42). This blessing has both immediate and broader biblical implications:

Recognition of Mary’s Role and Jesus’ Divinity - Elizabeth’s greeting highlights the special role Mary holds as the mother of the Messiah. By calling Mary “*blessed among women*” and blessing her child, Elizabeth acknowledges that Mary has been chosen by God in a unique way. Elizabeth’s response is rooted in the Spirit’s revelation to her of Mary’s divine pregnancy and the identity of her unborn child as the long-awaited Savior. This points to Elizabeth’s faith and her prophetic awareness of Jesus’ divinity.

The Joy of the Holy Spirit - Elizabeth’s reaction is prompted by the Holy Spirit. This moment signifies the joy that God’s presence brings, as Elizabeth and even her unborn child (John the Baptist) respond with joy and awe at the presence of the unborn Jesus. This joy is a recurring theme in Luke’s Gospel, portraying the coming of Jesus as a fulfillment of God’s promises.

Mary as the New Ark of the Covenant - In a broader biblical sense, some scholars see Mary’s visit to Elizabeth as reminiscent of the Ark of the Covenant coming to the house of Obed-Edom in 2 Samuel 6. Just as the Ark represented God’s presence among His people, Mary now brings the physical presence of God—Jesus—into Elizabeth’s home, symbolizing Mary as the new Ark of the Covenant.

The Obedience of Faith - This greeting, filled with blessing, affirms Mary's faith and obedience. Elizabeth's blessing, "*Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled*" (Luke 1:45), emphasizes Mary's faith as a model for all believers, highlighting her as an example of trust in God's promises. As the mother of the Lord, Mary is unique. As one who believes that God's Word will be fulfilled, she is a model of faith for us all.

Elizabeth's greeting sets the stage for Mary's Magnificat, the song of praise that follows, where Mary glorifies God's greatness and mercy. This entire scene underscores the theme of joy, faith, and God's unfolding salvation, all central to Luke's Gospel.

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