

## Mary and Elizabeth

Everything about the coming of Christ is unprecedented. The story actually begins, well, in the beginning,



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in a garden called Eden. There, God confronted Eve and the “serpent” and promised that the “enmity” between the woman and the tempting serpent would result in the serpent losing the battle for the heart of humankind (Genesis 3:13-15).

Fast-forward to the coming of Jesus. We clearly hear that God’s answer to our spiritual blindness and self-centered perspective appears in our world as the child of an obscure descendant of King David. He is celebrated by an older cousin who also bears a son, who will announce the arrival of God’s promised Savior. This lesson is not about gender equality, but the fact that God works in ways that do not conform to social norms or human theological preferences.

On the first Sunday in Advent we heard the angel Gabriel announce that God would send his son into the world and Mary would nurture him in her womb (Luke 1:26-38). Instead of debating how this could be, fascinating as that is, we confront an equally significant miracle: not just that a woman well beyond childbearing years was pregnant, but that woman is Mary’s relative, the wife of an elderly priest – and their son (John the baptizer) will announce that Jesus is God’s promised Messiah! In fact, Elizabeth tells Mary that at her appearing the child in Elizabeth’s womb “leaped for joy” (v. 44). The woman, not her priest husband, declared “blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord” (v. 45).

Can you imagine the joy of those two women? The longing of the Jews was for God’s Messiah to come and overthrow their hated Roman overlords. The longing of the Jewish

governing class was to welcome a Messiah who would bring Israel back as the fountain of God’s promise – independent, powerful, and recognized as God’s chosen people before all the world.

Instead, two women unknown to the world beyond their little villages were about to be key players in God’s ultimate revelation of his love and grace. I have often wondered, given their difference in age and limited travel, how long it had been since Mary, the little girl, had sat in the lap of Elizabeth and now they were sharing uniquely in the miracle of God’s grace? Hope, the God-variety in particular, cannot be predicted and does not depend on our ideas or timing. For all the wisdom of philosophers and debates among theologians, as well as traditions of organized religion, nothing begins to explain or revise what God has done to bring us into his loving embrace. Mary and Elizabeth understood!

Our text includes Mary’s celebratory hymn, which we call the “Magnificat” after the first word in the Latin translation. The words reflect the beauty and promise of the Old Testament, but they come alive in the wonder and joy of the girl from Nazareth who sings. There is no pride, no exaltation in her position, but only humility and joy: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” ... she refers to her “lowliness (as) his servant” ... and she will be called “blessed by all generations; for the Mighty One has done great things for me” ... “holy is his name” (vv. 47-49).

Mary goes on to compare God’s love and purpose to the world’s thinking: “God has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud ... brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (vv. 51-53).

You can compare Mary’s words to

the ministry of Jesus and you will discover a significant parallel. Let’s not forget in all the wonder and magic of Advent (and Christmas) that the Son of God came, not only to save us from our sin, but also to empower us to love as God’s people every day and draw this lost world to life-transforming faith. The Christmas story is not just a sweet tale of Bethlehem; it is the advent of God’s grace for all the world. As people of Christ, we best celebrate by our actions, words, and values.

The birth of Jesus is not God’s last great event to hopefully reach the human race. This is God’s plan, as Mary sings, “the promise he (God) made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants forever” (v. 55). I find myself watching news programs more than usual these days because I see the same enormity of despair, hear similarly empty religious pronouncements, and encounter harsh accusations similar to those that raged in the time of Mary and Elizabeth. I wonder why we as followers of Jesus cannot share the excitement and hope those two first century women experienced?

Mary’s song is full of hope and triumph. God is still God; Jesus loves us as much as he did when they crucified him. God’s grace is the only antidote to the hatred and selfishness that plagues every generation.

Will we dare to move beyond the parties and commercialism to share the love of God this Advent outside our homes and churches? We never hear about Elizabeth outside the beginning of the story. Mary’s last appearance is when Jesus is dying on the cross and he calls out to the Apostle John to care for Mary as though she were his own mother. Yet, both women are remembered, not for what they did, but for their simple but powerful faith. In this Advent may you find hope and joy in the words of Mary and Elizabeth who simply believed God.