

Luke 1:39-56 ‘A Holy Baby Shower’ December 20, 2105
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In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb.

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

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We’re not there yet.... Even though all our decorations are up, poinsettias and all, we’re not ready for Christmas yet: (and for those of you with more preparations to do at home, take that as good news!)

We’re not there yet because there is more story to be told. Or, better said, there is a necessary backstory to be told. And without this backstory, Christmas is just an ungrounded, ahistorical myth of God bursting into human life in an odd and weirdly sentimental way; a fairy tale. **With** the backstory, this is the saga of God who, in the grit of very real human life - to many folks along the way - shows up very differently than expected.

Today’s portion of the backstory is among those unusual tales we need to be reminded about, lest we forget how it is God chooses to appear in our lives, when we might not be looking.

Right now I can think of three women who are expecting a baby sometime in 2016. You probably know a few yourself. Baby showers will soon be coming. I’ve never gone to a baby shower, and guess it’s pretty customary for guys, even future Dads, not to attend. But today we make an exception.

Fortunately, all of us can attend this shower as described in Luke, Chapter One.

I hope it's not too out of line to think of this meeting of Mary and Elizabeth as a first-century

baby shower. It was a gathering like 21st-century baby showers in some ways; pregnant women getting together to support one another. Conversation that runs the gamut from the mundane to the monumental aspects of pregnancy and motherhood: cravings, hopes and fears about a new role in life; which pediatrician to choose, and much more.

In other ways Mary and Elizabeth's meeting was not like any shower any of us has been to. There were only two women present, and the only gifts exchanged were those from God: the ability to conceive and bear a child in the first place, and the guiding, inspiring presence of the Holy Spirit to live out their roles. The other key difference is that the impact of this meeting extended out many centuries into the future, across nationalities and cultures, as part of the overarching story of salvation.

The story line with which Luke opens his gospel is the record of John and Jesus, the forerunner and the Messiah, Israel's expectation and its Arrival. The stories of John and Jesus intersect in the meeting of their mothers. These two women meet and chat without the presence of any male character (other than their unborn babies). For those who look at the Bible with an examining eye, I wonder if this scene passes the 'Bechdel Test', when two or women (who need to have names), talk together about something other than a man. Here they talk about what God is doing with them and how it is that the world's future will be changed.

Given the rare occurrence of "women only" scenes in Scripture, it is all the more significant that Luke bookends his gospel with them. The Good News begins with Elizabeth and Mary and ends with the women who witnessed Jesus' burial and who went back to the tomb on Easter morning.

Outwardly, this pre-Nativity scene is calm, pastoral - but inwardly, under the surface, there is a lot going on. Growth is silent and slow on the inside, but a host of preparations need doing on the outside, and soon.

Mary prophesies much more happening through Jesus' birth than you might expect; the mighty being pulled down from their thrones; the hungry being filled with good things. Those sorts of things have never happened quietly, anywhere. Advent is not necessarily a quiet time.

The Biblical Scholar Alyce Mackenzie describes Advent as a *ruckus*, not a retreat. More than meets the eye and the ear than we are told.

Elizabeth and Mary are blessed with double vision. They believe that heaven and earth are on an unavoidable course of convergence. With eyes of faith and hopeful ears, they proclaim that the future God has planned is working its way from heaven to earth

through those who hear, and act, little by little, to make real what God intends for all of us. Advent is about God's promise of mercy, working out its way to come to our world.

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These two women are blessed not only for their status as mothers, but also for their trust in God's promise. Our English translations obscure an important nuance, that more than one word for "blessed" is used in the original Greek.

The first proclamation of Mary's blessing infers that future generations will praise and speak well of Mary and her child. But there is also a second word used of Blessing, that in her present belief itself Mary is blessed. The same word of blessing that Jesus used in the Beatitudes is used; (*makaria*). So, we might well translate Elizabeth's words as "Happy is she who believed ..." Mary is blessed because despite all expectations, her social status has been reversed: she will be honored rather than shamed for bearing this special child. But Mary is also been blessed with holy joy - with Beatitude - because she *believes* that God is able to do what God promises to do.

There is blessing in belief itself, a God-given ability to have hope when there appears to be no reason for it; to be able to see beyond the present circumstances to embrace the reality of God's love at work in the world when all seems lost.

One of the gifts of the Spirit of this season is to get us in touch with the blessings we have been given and the role we are to play as we cooperate, in all the scenes of our daily lives, with God's purpose to redeem the world. This backstory of Mary and Elizabeth also reminds us of the end game.

This holy baby shower is an event into which all of us are invited. We are inspired by the faith and courage of these biblical women, and reminded that we, like them, are blessed, because, like them, we participate in their mission of conveying the life and love of Christ to the world.

May we, like Elizabeth and Mary, trust that God is coming to save and free us. May we, like them, give thanks that God has taken away our shame and then respond to God's love by caring for those to whom God calls us.

May we, like them, become a community that supports each other as we hope and continue to wait; in Jesus' name. Amen.