



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 22, 2024
MICAH 5:1-5a; CANTICLE 15; HEBREWS 10:5-10; LUKE 1:39-45

DESTINATION UNKNOWN

Luke 9:51-62 [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."]

We know where we're going, don't we? The world around us is in a chaotic fog, but the road we travel as Christians this week is not a mystery. Very shortly, we will be with Mary and Joseph and the baby in Bethlehem. But we're not there yet. Mary has just made a journey – but it's not to Bethlehem. After finding out that she's going to be the mother of the Most High, rather than breaking the news to Joseph right away (a challenging conversation, I imagine),

she retreats to her older relative and fellow mom-to-be Elizabeth instead. We think of the trip to Bethlehem as the great journey of Christmas, but for Mary it starts with this step – the first time she trusts herself and someone else enough to share what God has entrusted to her.

Mary's instincts of whom to trust are spot on. Elizabeth could have said anything when she heard Mary's greeting. She could have barraged her

with advice; she could have filled up the space talking about herself; she could have lectured her on what to think or how to feel. But she doesn't. She offers a blessing instead. Notice, though, and this is important – it's not Mary's child-bearing capacity that makes her special; it's her faith. "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

In some ways, Elizabeth's story is more like ours than others we hear about at Christmas. Unlike Mary and Joseph, unlike her husband Zechariah, unlike the shepherds even, Elizabeth never receives an angelic message from on high. She has to trust what her body and spirit are telling her. Most of our signs from God are like that too; we feel them in our bodies. We sense them in our spirits. We meet them in the faces and voices of others who need our welcome. And when we respond, we too take on roles we never expected to fill – just like Elizabeth. Her husband is the priest, yet it's Elizabeth who's the prophet here – the one filled with the Holy Spirit. It's Elizabeth who blesses

Mary. It's Elizabeth, the lay person, the clergy spouse, who offers the human voice of comfort and reassurance when Mary needs it most.

I found myself thinking this week about the Elizabeths in my life – the trustworthy people who've given me a soft place to land when I needed it. My mother and grandmothers. The mentors who saw my vocation and call before I did, the friends who have been gracious with me when I'm anxious and sad, the colleagues who have helped me to be OK with the fact that we never really know what's coming next. I also found myself wondering who my Marys are – those who are entrusting the deepest truths of their lives to me. That might be your point of reflection too. Who are your Elizabeths? Who are your Marys? Perhaps it's time to thank God for them, for who they're stretching you to become.

I wonder what it would look like if we receive everyone we encounter over the holidays as Elizabeth receives Mary. I'm not saying we can't draw boundaries when we need to; there are

times when we can't give strangers or even loved ones everything they want from us. But we don't need to lead with unsolicited advice or lectures on what to think or how to feel; we can lead with an open heart instead. Sometimes this is easier with strangers than our own families. We know how our loved ones have judged us in the past, how they've narrowed their visions of us to their own selective memories; what we don't always realize is that we may have done the same to them. If they haven't let us grow, maybe we haven't let them grow either. I wonder what would happen if we followed Elizabeth's and Mary's examples – if we reached out to each other across distances of age and experience and practiced trust, if we learned together to greet the unexpected not just with fear, but with wonder too – because the God who makes promises to us can be trusted to keep them.

That doesn't mean that the journey is clear or that the world around us will cooperate. We know that Bethlehem is coming for Mary, but she doesn't. As far as she knows at this moment, she'll

eventually go home to face Joseph, her family, her community back in Nazareth – and God only knows what their reaction will be. She can't see much past that. By Christmas night, of course, she'll be in Bethlehem – but she won't stay there long either. Before long, she and her little family will be refugees on their way to Egypt. It will be years before she's home again. But maybe it's OK that she doesn't know all of that just now. Maybe, as her son will say decades later, "today's troubles are enough for today." And today, what she has in front of her is an impossible call from God that she somehow believes, an uncertain future, and words of comfort and blessing from an older, trustworthy friend.

Likewise, we can't see that far ahead, not really. We're living in a time of profound social mistrust; perhaps the most revolutionary act we can perform this Christmas is to practice trust anyway – in ourselves, in one another as a faith community, in God. Injustice thrives when we're scared and isolated; justice takes root when we share our hopes and fears and stay grounded and

honest about what God has entrusted to us. At this moment, Elizabeth and Mary don't know where their journeys will take them anymore that we know where our lives will take us in the next

year, but they trust that the One who promised to be with them will be with them every step of the way – no matter how long it takes. Maybe that's enough for us today too. Amen.



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