

The Definition of Love

Today's gospel reading is important for a number of reasons. There are two parallel stories happening here, each as important as the other.

Elizabeth was Mary's cousin and was expecting what we would refer to as a "miracle baby". Poor Elizabeth is described in a couple of ways...one translation refers to her and Zechariah, as "getting on in years" and another one says she was "as good as dead". I mean...how rude. Some sources say she was as old as 88 when she gave birth to John. Could you imagine?!?

Both Elizabeth and Zechariah were considered blameless in the eyes of God. They followed the commandments, Zechariah was the high priest and found God's favour. Yet it wasn't a well received message. Zechariah, once he revived from the shock of the angel appearing with the standard "BE NOT AFRAID", is described as being terrified with fear overwhelming him. Well, duh.

Gabriel introduces himself and proceeds to tell Zechariah that his prayers have been answered. Elizabeth will conceive and bear a son who will be called John. Tradition, at that time, would have held that Zechariah's first son would be named after him. However, this turns out not to be the case.

So, Gabriel explains what is going to happen and Zechariah replies that he is old and Elizabeth is getting on in years. Gabriel is not best pleased with Zechariah's reply and he is informed that all Gabriel has said will happen, and until that time Zechariah will be unable to speak. The last thing a priest or minister wants to hear is that they will be unable to speak for Worship! Also, as Zechariah was the High Priest that year, it was his turn to enter the holy of holies and speak aloud the name of God. This could happen only once a year.

Then Gabriel goes home, he and Elizabeth have some "special time" together and whatdya know...she conceives! Unfortunately we don't learn of Elizabeth's reaction to Zechariah's muteness or her pregnancy. The muteness was likely a shock and I cannot imagine how she would have reacted to her pregnancy.

She entered seclusion, as was custom at the time and during this time Mary came to visit her. There are many reasons why Elizabeth went into seclusion, none of them particularly important in the grand scheme of things.

Gabriel, the same angel who visited Zechariah, comes to visit Mary. Why Mary was chosen is also a matter of some speculation, and again, it's not particularly important in the grand scheme of things...except for one thing. Mary was to be known as the light-bearer and the God-bearer. She wasn't chosen because of her family connections. She wasn't chosen because of her age. She wasn't chosen because of her appearance. She may or may not have been chosen specifically for any other reason than this – she was filled with grace.

Grace! That same grace which is showered upon us, upon the undeserving, was showered upon Mary. She was a typical Nazarean teenager, engaged to be married to Joseph, who himself was well respected. An angel shows up while she is alone and tells her two remarkable things.

He starts off "Greetings, favoured one, the LORD is with you", which perplexes her. He then follows up with the standard, BE NOT AFRAID. What follows is a paraphrase.

Gabriel: Hey Kid, how are ya today?

Mary: I'm sorry, who are you? Why are you talking to me?

Gabriel: Don't be afraid –

Mary: I'm not afraid –

Gabriel: Don't interrupt me.

Mary: Go on –

Gabriel: You've been chosen. To be the light-bearer. To be the God-bearer.

Mary: I'm sorry, WHAT?

Gabriel: Listen, kid. You have been CHOSEN to be the light-bearer.

Mary: I heard what you said, I just don't get why I've been chosen.

Gabriel: It's God's will.

Mary: I can't be pregnant, because well, you know.

Gabriel: Listen, kid. This remarkable thing is going to happen to you, whether you are ready for it or not. Nothing bad will happen to you. I'm going to pop by and have a chat with Joseph, so he's up to speed with this whole thing.

OH! And before I forget, your cousin Elizabeth, who was supposedly “barren” is in fact, expecting a miracle baby of her own. She’s about six months along. Isn’t that great? You see kid, nothing is impossible when you are filled with God’s grace, and you’ve got grace to spare.

Mary: (taking a deep breath) Wow! Um, first Elizabeth and now me. I need to check this out. I hope you’re telling me the truth.

Gabriel: Gotta go. Need to have a chat with Joseph and then terrify some shepherds.

And then Mary hurries to see Elizabeth. This must all have been too much for young Mary. Her head swimming with what she has just heard...so she enters into her cousin Elizabeth’s home. And what do you know? Elizabeth, who is elderly, is also six months pregnant.

Mary greets Elizabeth, we’re not told how but it may have gone something like this...

Mary: Cousin! You’re not going to believe what I just heard – holy moly, you’re pregnant!

Elizabeth: Mary, you will be soon as well. Why, you’re positively glowing!

John, in Utero: Hey Ma, is THIS the light-bearer? WOO HOO! Let me dance my appreciation!

Elizabeth: Settle down in there! Oh Mary, can you believe this? We, us two humble women from Nowhere, are both carrying remarkable babies. Can you believe we have both found God’s favour in such a way? We are both living proof that nothing is impossible with God’s grace!

And Mary’s reaction is to burst into song. I mean, why not?

In all seriousness, Mary’s song, known as the Magnificat has been set to music for thousands of years. From chants, to plainsong, to hymns such as “Tell Out My Soul”, to contemporary songs such as “Mary Did You Know?” Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a big deal.

God’s love for Elizabeth meant she was to give birth to John, who would be the one to announce the coming of the Messiah, son of the living God - God’s love coming down to earth.

God's love for Mary meant she was to give birth to the Messiah. God's love coming down to earth.

God's love for humanity meant that Jesus would be born to show God's love coming down to earth. The second Adam. The first one didn't work out so well, so God gave it some thought, and tried again, 76 generations later, or roughly 4,000 years.

Let me put something into perspective for you.

Most of us are feeling stressed this time of year. Too much to do! Cleaning, cooking, baking, decorating, shopping, mailing, laundry, housework, services, funerals, car repairs, doctor's appointments. There's not enough hours in the day. I discovered, much to my horror on Friday night that in the process of tidying up my Google Drive, I managed to delete all but one set of Worship Slides. Not intentionally, of course.

I sat, in stunned silence, not sure if I should laugh or cry or rage or scream. Instead I said a quick prayer "God, don't fail me now, please don't take my sense of humour away, and while I'm at it, please let me keep all my marbles. Amen." Then I started working from written Worship Notes, and started putting together Worship Slides for today's service. It took nearly four hours from start to finish.

I may not feel completely prepared for Christmas...yet in all honesty, I don't ever feel completely prepared for Christmas. I don't feel prepared until I have preached my last sermon, called my Mam and Brother and THEN I feel prepared. And usually quite tired.

Because you see, God's grace extended from Elizabeth to Mary, through 76 generations from Adam to Jesus and on to us as well. We receive God's grace and love whether we feel entitled to it, undeserving of it, or don't give it any thought. Grace is a tremendous gift because it is priceless. There is absolutely no way to repay God's grace. Which sits poorly for most of us, I'd venture. Most, if not all of us, have been raised to be polite. To say please and thank you, and in most cases, write a thank you note when a gift is received.

Elizabeth received the gift of Grace and Motherhood in the birth of John the Baptist, a miracle in his own right. Jesus wouldn't be Jesus without the birth of John the Baptist. In Isaiah, Chapter 40, verses 3-5 we are told "A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'"

Mary received the gift of Grace and Motherhood in the birth of Jesus. She was hesitant at first, and who wouldn't be, yet once she settles into the role, she makes a statement, a declaration of sors – a battle cry!

Mary's soul MAGNIFIES the glory of God.

She foretells the coming of her child Jesus...and what God has done, is doing and is yet to come.

Listen to this powerful language...

"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."

Revolutionary for a time such as then...revolutionary for a time such as now!

Mary was about shining a light on the dark corners of poverty.

She was about magnifying the injustices of the world.

Those who were previously less than, would now receive their fair share and then some.

Those who previously hoarded more than their fair share would now find themselves going without.

Your homework for this afternoon – should you choose to do it, is to read from Luke's Gospel. First, Luke 1.46-55, Mary's Magnificat. Then, read Luke 6.20-26, also known as the Sermon on the Plain. Similar to, but not identical to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel.

All of this to say...the 25th of December will be here in five days.
We will gather in four days to begin celebrating this incredible moment.
We will see and hear things we have seen and heard before.
And we will also see and hear things that we have not seen or heard before.

And whether you believe Jesus was born at midnight on the 24th of December or at some other point in the calendar year, we will gather, as Church has for thousands of years, in ways familiar and in ways unseen to experience something absolutely extraordinary.

But before we get there – let us take today to give thanks for two revolutionary women who were confronted with life-changing experiences, from which they did not flinch or shy away.

For Elizabeth, who bore the one who would become the voice in the wilderness. The one who would announce the coming of the Messiah, of God's love, come down to earth.

For Mary, who bore the one who would, ultimately, give his life for ours. The light-bearer who will always have a special place in the Church. She was with him, hearing many wonderful things from strangers and keeping them all safe and close to her heart.

May we all share the grit and resilience of Elizabeth and the grace and determination of Mary...only four more sleeps!

Amen.

Luke 1.39-55
Sermon for Advent IV
19 December 2021

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