

December 19, 2021
Fourth Sunday of Advent
Luke 1:39-45

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

Background:

The Gospel for this Sunday follows immediately after Luke's description of Mary accepting the invitation to be the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:26-38). Some have suggested that Mary went to visit Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist, in order to help Elizabeth. But Luke reports that Mary left Elizabeth before John was born. "Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home. When the time arrived for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a son." (Luke 1:56-57) Therefore Mary would be leaving Elizabeth during that period when she would have needed the most assistance.

Luke's gospel does not indicate a precise location from which Mary left, or the town to which she went. This would seem to indicate that it was both an insignificant place and not important for what he wants his community to know. But what Luke's community would notice is that Mary seems to be making the four-day journey alone. Women in this culture were always in the company of other women, children, and/or a male protector. For Mary, a fourteen-year-old girl, to travel alone would be enough to accuse her of being of shameful character. Yet the text calls Mary "blessed" three different times: for her unique role in God's plan, and for her faith in God. On one hand the details that Luke includes seem to cast Mary in a rather suspicious light, yet he strongly asserts that she is blessed.

Reflection Questions:

1. When you are told that a couple is expecting, what are some of the thoughts and feelings that rise within you?
2. What are some of the thoughts and feelings you have as you hear that Mary set out for the hill country to visit her cousin Elizabeth, whom the angel has told her is also with child?
3. Luke's gospel here focuses on Elizabeth's greeting of Mary, but Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months. What are some of things they might have talked about during that time?
4. Luke's portrait of Mary emphasizes her faith and her willingness to do things that might cast her in a poor light before others. How does this view of Mary fit with your image of Mary?
5. Both Mary and Elizabeth are women who are unlikely to become pregnant, or to be significant figures in the religious or political world of their day, yet they play central roles in our understanding of our faith history. How does that reality speak to you today?
6. Can you talk to God now about how God used Mary and Elizabeth to reveal God's desire to bring Jesus into the world, or about your own desire to be an instrument of God's presence in your world, or about some other thought that this gospel raised within you?
7. The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fsc-calledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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Excerpts from the readings for December 19, 2021, the Fourth Sunday of Advent

Thus says the Lord: 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. Therefore, the Lord will give them up, until the time when she who is to give birth has borne, and the rest of his kindred shall return to the children of Israel. He 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; he shall be peace.

*Lord, make us turn to you; let us see your face and we shall be saved.
O shepherd of Israel, hearken, from your throne upon the cherubim, shine forth.
Rouse your power, and come to save us.
Once again, O Lord of hosts, look down from heaven, and see; take care of this vine,
and protect what your right hand has planted, the son of man whom you yourself made strong.
May your help be with the man of your right hand, with the son of man whom you made strong.
Then we will no more withdraw from you; give us new life, and we will call upon your name.*

Brothers and sisters: When Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; in holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight. Then I said, 'As is written of me in the scroll, behold, I come to do your will, O God.'" First he says, "Sacrifices and offerings, holocausts and sin offerings, you neither desired nor delighted in." These are offered according to the law. Then he says, "Behold, I come to do your will." He takes away the first to establish the second. By this "will," we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

Excerpts from Micah 5:1-4A; Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19; Hebrews 10:5-10; and Luke 1:39-45

From Joe: Friends,

Here are the gospel background and reflection questions for December 19th, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. On this fourth Sunday of Advent, the gospel, again from Luke, continues with the Advent message of being prepared for the Lord's coming. For the last two Sundays, the gospels have told of John the Baptist's teachings. This gospel goes back further in his life -- it is the beloved story of Mary's visitation to her kinswoman Elizabeth, who was at the time pregnant with John. Upon Mary's greeting to her, Elizabeth says, "Blessed are you, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. At the moment of your greeting, the infant in my womb leapt for joy! How is it that the mother of my Lord has come to me? Blessed are you who believed what was spoken to you by the Lord!"

The other readings make further references to the purpose of the Lord's coming, and prophecies and anticipations of his arrival. In the first reading, Micah says, "From you, Bethlehem, shall come forth one who is to rule Israel, whose origin is from ancient times. He shall shepherd his flock by the strength of the Lord. He shall be peace." Psalm 80 proclaims, "Shepherd of Israel, look down from heaven, and come to save us. Let us see your face, and we shall be saved." In the second reading, according to the letter to the Hebrews, "Christ said, 'A body you prepared for me, O, God; I come to do your will.' By this 'will' we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ."

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!

*O shepherd of Israel, hearken,
from your throne upon the cherubim, shine forth.
Psalm 80:2*