

December 22, 2024
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 also states 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) It seems that Mary left Elizabeth when she most needed assistance. It seems reasonable to believe that Mary had more than one reason for going to visit Elizabeth.

Luke only describes Mary as traveling to the hill country to visit Elizabeth. The details of the trip are left vague. This would seem to indicate that both the origin and destination of Mary's journey were insignificant places and not important for 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.

Reflection Questions:

1. When you are told that a couple you know is expecting, what are some of the thoughts and feelings that rise within you?
2. What does Luke's inclusion that Mary went in haste say to you?
3. The journey was probably about 100 miles, on foot or donkey. What do you think Mary thought about on that journey?
4. Do you experience your hopes coming to fruition? Do you also experience your hopes being dashed? Elizabeth says that Mary was blessed for believing that what God had said to her was true. Does that say anything to you?
5. Mary is a young woman, pregnant not by the man to whom she is betrothed. Elizabeth is long past the age for childbearing, and yet more than six months pregnant. Both women have good reason to be worried, yet they are presented to us as models of joyfulness. How does that speak to you?
6. The power of the Holy Spirit is at work when the yet-unborn John the Baptist leaps in Elizabeth's womb at the presence of the unborn Jesus. What does this say to you about where you might find the Holy Spirit working in your life?
7. What do the world's refugees say to you about people living with hope?
8. Luke's Gospel here focuses on Elizabeth's greeting of Mary, but Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months. What are some of things they might have talked about during that time?
9. Both Mary and Elizabeth are women with irregular pregnancies who are insignificant figures in the religious and political world, yet they play central roles in our understanding of our faith history. Does that reality speak to you today?
10. Can you talk to God now about how God used Mary and Elizabeth to bring God's desire into the world, your own desire to be an instrument of God's presence, or some other thought that this Gospel raised within you?

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://fscclalledtobe.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 22, 2024, 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 5:1-4; Psalm 80:2-3, 15-16, 18-19; Hebrews 10:5-10; and Luke 1:39-45

Friends,

Here are the Gospel background and reflection questions for December 22nd, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, the Gospel, from Luke, is the first part of the story where Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, just after she was told by the angel Gabriel that Elizabeth was with child. Elizabeth says to Mary, "At the moment 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."

The other readings have additional references to words of the Lord, about one who is to give birth, and about one who is to be born, to be a firm ruler and protector, by the will and power of the Lord. In the first reading from Micah, Bethlehem is told, "From you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel. When she who is to give birth has borne, the rest of his kindred shall return. He shall shepherd by the strength of the Lord." Psalm 80 implores, "O shepherd of Israel, rouse your power; give us new life. May your help be with the son of man whom you yourself made strong." In the second reading, from the letter to the Hebrews, Paul writes, "Christ said, 'A body you prepared for me. Behold, I come to do your will, O God.' By this "will," we have been consecrated through the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

The Gospels from Luke through the Sundays of Advent have been narrowing their focus, or working their way backward, so to speak, as the weeks progress toward the feast of the birth of the Lord. The Gospel from the First Sunday of Advent was from near the end of Luke's Gospel, where Jesus told his disciples, "They will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud. When these signs begin to happen, your redemption is at hand. Be vigilant." The vigilance we are reminded of here is the vigilance we must all keep up for his return, for his second coming. The Gospel for the Second Sunday of Advent was about John the Baptist proclaiming a baptism of repentance, and working within the prophecy from Isaiah: 'A voice of one crying out in the desert: "Prepare the way of the Lord.'" This past Sunday, the Third Sunday of Advent, John responded to those who asked, "What should we do," and when "the people were filled with expectation, asking whether John might be the Messiah," he answered them saying, "One mightier than I is coming.'" In this Sunday's Gospel, that same John is the unborn John leaping for joy, as the mother of the unborn Jesus, by a greeting, announces the Lord's presence. The focus is brought to the feast of this Son of Man's incarnation and nativity, celebrated just a few days further on. What was spoken to them by the Lord will be fulfilled. Not only will the soon-to-be newborn be a future ruler, protector, and firm shepherd, with "greatness that shall reach to the ends of the earth," according to Micah's prophecy, "He shall be peace."

Joe

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