

19 December 2021: Fourth Sunday of Advent, Luke 1:39-45 (Year C)

Women knew salvation first: at Christmas and Easter women are the first to witness and confess. In today's Gospel we eavesdrop on Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth was barren and as Luke delicately puts it *getting on in years* (1:7)—by ancient standards, perhaps 40 years old. Here, too, is Mary, whom Luke describes as a *virgin engaged to...Joseph* (1:27). Mary was likely a young teenager. Both are pregnant, Elizabeth unexpectedly, Mary scandalously. Through God's mercy 'getting-on-in-years' Elizabeth and husband, Zechariah, (1:18) conceived a child. Mary, too, is pregnant, but without human agency: she is the instrument for the miracle birthing eternal life for all.

We would expect Mary to be center stage, but as the cousins first meet, she is more a wondrous presence; only after Elizabeth's and her child's reactions to her does Mary speak (1:46-56). Elizabeth's child, known to us as John the Baptist, *leaped in her womb* at the sound of Mary's voice (1:41a,b); Elizabeth, *filled with the Holy Spirit* (1:41c-45), prophesied, proclaimed and praised. This meeting of Mary and Elizabeth pre-figures John the Baptist's prophesy and proclamation of Jesus. Elizabeth is the forerunner of Mary, as John the Baptist is of Jesus.

Consider Elizabeth's words about Mary: *...blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord* (1:42a, 45). From earliest times Mary has been called the "Blessed Virgin Mary" because of this verse. To refer to Mary in this way is not 'catholic' it is biblical; in doing so we echo Elizabeth. Mary is blessed because she believed God would fulfill through her what was promised: the Word made flesh through her flesh. She is blessed because of her obedience.

To our ears the word 'obedience' is as popular as: "foot fungus," or "there's a cop behind you." However much we think of ourselves as free agents charting a self-governed course through life beholden to no one, we are *always* obedient to something. The question is 'what commands our obedience and why.' We may be obedient to a substance—alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, food; obedient to fear, anger, or lust; obedient to greed, envy, or coveting; obedient to pride. Our obedience may be to authority figures, a political ideology, to what is popular or others' opinions of us. Usually, a pungent stew of such things demands our obedience. Whatever sets the course for your life, informs your decisions, defines your relationships, governs your thoughts and actions, that is what your obedience serves—what you truly love.

Mary said, "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word*" (1:38). Mary's "yes" to God was certainly an act of her will, a will formed by her love of God and love for her people. This is the connection we can easily miss. We equate obedience with demand, being forced to comply by threat or power. There is a world of difference between being coerced, which births resentment, and obedience, which is born of love. Love impregnates us with the desire to serve and attend the one we love. We will want to please the other; the other's joy will be our joy, we will want to 'make better' the other's sorrow; we will 'walk with' in times of challenge and tragedy; their sickness will move us to pity and when they die, we die, too, even if we continue living. This is so because this is how God loves us. Obeying for one's own eternal good, for the good of others, and to make real God's Kingdom now is love in the image and likeness of God. As we welcome God's transforming love into our lives we grow more and more into the image and likeness of God's love for all.

Here are words from St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a saint ravished by God's love. "Love alone can turn the mind away from loving ourselves and the world, and fix it on loving God. Neither fear nor love of self can change the soul. At times they change our appearance or deeds, but they can never alter our character...love converts us because it makes us act willingly."

Love converts us because it makes us act willingly. The days are drawing close: our Savior is coming, almost here. May you love him into obedience, and may Jesus, in his love, speed you like Mary 'in this way of life and in faith, that you may run on the path of God's commandments, your heart overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love' (Rule of St. Benedict, Prologue).

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can receive be yours, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.