

Sermon for Advent 4, Year C

December 22, 2024 St. Luke/San Lucas

Micah 5:2-5a; Hebrews 10:5-10; Canticle 15 (Song of Mary); Luke 1:39-55

In the name of God above us,  
In the name of God among us,  
In the name of God within us,  
Thanks be to God. Amen.

Preparing for sermons, I often read other sermons preached on the scripture passages or on similar Sundays in years past. There were a lot of interesting items for Advent 4, and for these passages. Some focused on the links between the Old Testament prophecies found in Micah and the New Testament fulfillment with the coming of Jesus. Others spent time looking at the Hebrews passage, highlighting that God doesn't want sacrifices and rituals from us, but rather for us to do God's will, to live out Jesus' teachings, to bring the kingdom of God into the world through our actions, not our words. Most, however, focused on the words of the Magnificat, the Song of Mary, with its message of social justice, of mercy and joy and peace. So much good grist for the sermon mill. So many good ideas. My brain was spinning!

Then, we had our healing service on Wednesday. At these services, we have a regular practice. We read out the Gospel for the following Sunday. Then, we reflect as a group on that passage. What words or phrases stand out to us? What questions do we have? What is meaningful to us? And with that, I found the theme for this sermon. So, my thanks go to all who participated in this Wednesday's service, and be forewarned, you may find some of your thoughts in what follows.

It started with a question: Why is the last sentence in Elizabeth's statement in the third person? Why does she say, "Blessed is *she* who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to *her* by the Lord." Elizabeth is speaking directly to her relative, Mary, so why doesn't she say, "Blessed are you for believing that there will be a fulfillment of what God told you."

In looking more closely at the passage, I realized there was another important question, one that kept coming back into my thoughts, one that Elizabeth herself asked. And that question is, "Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" Why has this happened to me? Why?

Many of the commentaries I checked view Elizabeth's question as an expression of wonder. Why has this happened to me? Why was I chosen? Why am I so special? Why have I been selected for this honor?

However, I wonder if perhaps there is another way this question can be read. Not as “Why has this happened to me? Look at me, aren’t I special,” but more as, “Why has this happened to me? Don’t I already have enough on my plate, God, and now you’re sending me this?”

Now, to understand why Elizabeth might be asking this question and what her tone might have been, it’s helpful to know a bit about Elizabeth herself and her situation. Elizabeth was a distant relative to Mary, a cousin perhaps. She was quite a bit older than the teenage Mary, and had been married for some time to Zechariah, a man from the priestly family, a descendant of Moses’ brother, Aaron.

Elizabeth and Zechariah are described as being righteous. They followed the law as laid out in the Hebrew Scriptures. They traveled regularly to Jerusalem for feast days and sacrifices, and so that Zechariah could carry out his priestly obligations. And they were faithful in prayer. For many years, they prayed for a child for themselves, as well as for freedom and justice for their occupied homeland. Both prayers seemingly remained unanswered, yet still they prayed. Then, after many years, following Zechariah’s duty at the temple during which he was visited by an angel, Elizabeth became pregnant.

We don’t know the details of Elizabeth and Zechariah’s infertility journey. We don’t know if they waited, month by month, only to be disappointed when they failed to conceive. Or perhaps they did conceive, only to experience early pregnancy loss. What we do know is that, after years of trying and despite their advanced age, Elizabeth was finally in the later stages of her very first successful pregnancy, when what should happen? Her unmarried, teenaged, distant relative, Mary, shows up on her doorstep one day, pregnant, alone, and requesting entry. Requesting shelter and support. Requesting asylum. Putting Zechariah and, most particularly, Elizabeth, right in the center of a social and familial drama. So much for a quiet pregnancy!

Why has this happened to me? Why have you, Mary, come to me? I can imagine Elizabeth asking this because she felt inadequate, unprepared, not up to the task. Here was her younger relative, coming to her for advice and support during her pregnancy. Perhaps asking questions about what to expect as her body changes, as she goes through childbirth. Questions that Elizabeth, going through her own first pregnancy, having never experienced childbirth herself, questions Elizabeth may have felt unable to answer. Why me, God?

Why has this happened to me? Why have you, Mary, come to me? I can imagine Elizabeth asking this because she felt like Mary was asking the wrong person. Why isn’t Mary talking to her mother? Or her sister? Or her best friend? To some other relative that lived closer, that had a better relationship with Joseph and his family. Someone like Mary’s father, who had the authority to actually protect Mary, to grant her the social cover she needed to figure things out as a single, expectant mother. Why me, God?

Why has this happened to me? Why have you, Mary, come to me? I can imagine Elizabeth asking this because she felt the need to protect herself. Expectant mothers, especially older mothers with a long history of infertility, having finally reached the later stages of this precious pregnancy, these mothers are to be protected. No heavy lifting. Lots of rest. Plenty of healthy food. And above all, NO STRESS. Instead, Elizabeth has on her doorstep, in her living room, Mary, young, unwed, pregnant, the very definition of family and social drama. Could there be a greater source of stress? Why me, God, why me?

But God, the Holy Spirit, gives Elizabeth a sign. The baby, who we know as John the Baptizer, didn't just flutter a bit or turn over. No, when Mary spoke, John leaped within Elizabeth's womb. Elizabeth recognized that God was working in Mary. Her first words of greeting have become famous, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Recognizing that Mary was blessed, that God had a plan for her, Elizabeth still had questions about what she was to do, questions that are voiced in what, I believe, were Elizabeth's very sincere cry, "Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" Why are you here? Why is this happening to me?

But then Elizabeth figures something out and, I believe, we may just have a bit of insight into our original question of why Elizabeth continues in the third person. "Blessed is *she* who believed that there would be fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Blessed is Mary, yes, but also blessed is Elizabeth! Elizabeth who, after years of infertility, had been promised a baby by her Lord. Elizabeth who had God's word that she would have a son. Elizabeth, who believed that God's word would be fulfilled, God's promises kept.

When Elizabeth accepted, embraced her vocation, what she was called to do, when she believed that God would fulfill the promises God had made to her, that she would have a baby, there was joy, not only for her, but also for her child. She had strength and knowledge and wisdom to share with Mary; she had courage to protect and shelter this vulnerable relative in her time of need.

What has us saying, why has this happened to me? What has us questioning, questioning our strength, our power, our knowledge, our wisdom? What has us wanting to retreat, to give in to fear, to build up walls of self-protection? What has us asking, why has this happened to me? Why have you come to me? What can I do for you?

There are so many needs in the world. Lowly who need to be lifted up. Haughty who really should be brought low. Hungry who need to be fed. Unhoused who need to be sheltered. Sick who need to be tended. Vulnerable who need to be protected. Young persons who need to be mentored. Older folk who need to be valued and respected.

The needs around us can be overwhelming. And particularly at this time of year, as we are supposed to be filled with joy and peace, while at the same time prepare perfect meals,

find perfect gifts, attend multiple holiday functions, always perfectly attired and with the perfect response for any occasion. So many social and family expectations. So many demands on our time, our patience, our selves. How often in the midst of all these happy holidays do we feel inadequate, do we wonder if we are the wrong person, do we retreat into a self-protective cocoon?

With all this hustle and bustle, it is so easy to lose sight of the central question, but Elizabeth is here to remind us. Why has this happened to us? Because we are blessed. We are blessed because we have God's promises. The lowly will be exalted. The hungry will be fed.

We are blessed because we believe in those promises, that God has done great things for us, that God has looked with favor on each of us, no matter how lowly. That God has extended mercy, kept promises, and most important of all, that God sent Jesus Christ, God's own beloved Son, to share with us God's great love.

So, as we leave behind this Advent season of preparation, as we enter the celebratory Christmas tide, let us hold tight, not to the question, why is this happening to me? But instead, let us hold tight to Elizabeth's response, blessed are we who believe that what God has said will be fulfilled. Blessed are we who believe we are forgiven when we do wrong. Blessed are we who are assured of God's mercy and grace to us at all times and in all circumstances. Blessed are we who truly believe God's promise to us, that we are welcomed, that we are celebrated, that we are children of God, and yes, that we are loved.

Amen.