

Sermon for Advent IV
December 20, 2015
Trinity Parish, Seattle

Micah 5:2-5a; Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55

The encounter between Mary and Elizabeth that we hear about in today's Gospel just might be the most unlikely, the most exuberant, intimate, the most *Spirit-filled*, encounter between two people in all of scripture. And I believe it has some things to say to us about intimacy – with one another, and with God.

What a simple, yet beautiful picture it is. Mary is a young girl, most likely in her early to mid-teens. She has just arrived in the Judean hills after a long journey from Galilee – probably a two or three day journey on foot. She arrives alone at the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Mary has very possibly been sent here to the home of her older relative to prevent a scandal back home. Mary is unmarried, and she is pregnant.

Elizabeth is much older. Her husband, Zechariah, is a priest, still unable to speak since his encounter with an angel announcing that Elizabeth would bear a son. She was a woman, who, we're told, was righteous, blameless before the Lord. The combination of her age, her social status, and her impeccable reputation, made her someone to be looked up to and admired – perhaps someone to be reckoned with. And yet, there was until now a terrible sadness in her life. Elizabeth had no children – something that was not only a disappointment to her, but in her day and in her culture something for which she was stigmatized. Elizabeth had struggled to maintain her dignity in a world that could be harsh and unforgiving. She was now well past child-bearing age, but a miraculous thing had occurred. She, too, like her much younger relative, Mary, was expecting a baby.

And so, when Mary enters the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah, she looks right past Zechariah, sees Elizabeth standing in the doorway, and she greets her, perhaps a bit timidly at first, as a young person would to an older and respected

relative. There they stand, two expectant mothers, looking at one another with the kind of recognition that only two pregnant women can have for each other. There is a knowing, empathic look – aware of all the emotions, the changes in the body, perhaps some sympathy for the nausea and sickness that often go along with it. And on top of all that for these two, there are the highly unlikely circumstances of both of their pregnancies.

Elizabeth is soon overcome. She recognizes Mary's child without even seeing him, when her own child suddenly leaps in her womb. At that moment the intimacy between these two women goes to a whole new level. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, and losing all composure and no doubt with tears in her eyes she cries out to the young Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." The normal protocols of youth and age, low or high standing go out the window. And suddenly it is no longer Mary who is honored to be in the home of her older relative, but Elizabeth who exclaims in disbelief to the young Mary, "And why has this happened to me, that the mother of *my Lord* comes to *me*? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in *my womb leaped for joy.*"

From that point Mary goes on, seemingly overcome and in a state of rapture, to speak those moving words of the Magnificat – that beautiful hymn familiar to us from the evening prayer service – words that have been set to music perhaps more than almost any other biblical text by composers, ancient and modern:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; *
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed: *
the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.

From Mary's entrance and greeting, perhaps the touch of each to the other, to Elizabeth's recognition, to Mary's exuberant hymn, there's a depth of intimacy in this story that we can barely comprehend – perhaps especially for those of us who have never born and never *will* bear children.

As a companion to my wife, Carolyn, during two pregnancies, I can remember some vague feelings of (and you might find this just a bit odd), but feelings of *envy* from time to time – yes, pregnancy envy! Not during the times when she was puking up her guts! I did not envy that, but during those times when she could feel the baby moving inside her, or when she would talk about the feelings she had, knowing that our child was growing inside her. I loved to feel the movements, and to press on her tummy to feel the developing limbs of our little unseen miracle – wondering what it must have been like for the two of them, mother and child, to be so close, to be one body yet two people as they were. I often put my ear to her belly to listen to the gurgling sounds, and then place my throat there to talk or sing to this mysterious little presence. I was determined that both of our two children would be born recognizing the voice of their daddy, just as they would the voice and every other sound of their mother’s body. But even so, it was an intimacy that I could only dream about, and never fully achieve. The two of them, mother and child, had something together that I would never fully know. I tried to make up for that with the several middle of the night (not always totally willing, I must say) 2 or 3 am excursions to find things like rhubarb pie (and I don’t know what else) to satisfy the irrational cravings of this intimate duo. I was an enchanted if not always enthusiastic slave to the whole process.

So, when I see Mary and Elizabeth in this unforgettable encounter, there is something in me, and in some sense in all of us, that *desires* what they have. Now I don’t mean, of course, the idea of having a baby, and the closeness of that particular relationship. It’s not the case that all of us would want that. But it is something deeper that’s going on here, in the recognition of *the very presence of God* in that intimate encounter – an encounter between the human and the divine. Mary was the one through whom God’s presence would take on flesh and blood, and bring the reality of “God with us” into the world and into our consciousness in a whole new way, and teach us how to live our lives in the awareness of God with us.

The joy! The intimacy! The feeling of oneness. Isn’t that what we all really, really want after all? To be able not only to be bearers of God’s presence into the world, but also to be able to recognize it in others, and to be in awe at its presence?

The story doesn't tell us anything about Zechariah during this encounter. I'm not much of an artist, but if I were going to paint this scene, as many artists have, I would include Zechariah in it. He would be standing off to the side, looking at the two of them looking at each other, with a kind of holy envy. Tears would be streaming down his face. Still speechless, he would recognize what he had not been able to when the angel appeared to him, that a great mystery was in play, and yes, he too was part of it. It is the mystery of the ages: God's presence coming among us, breaking forth into our reality. I like to think that while he was just a little slower to grasp it than they were, he was still able to share in the beauty and wonder of that moment, his eyes opened even if his ears and his mouth were not just yet.

You and I may be a little slow, too, to recognize God's presence in ourselves or in others. We may be more like Zechariah than either Elizabeth or Mary. And we may not have the words to speak or to articulate what this presence is all about. But just our *desire* to know this presence is a great start. What's so wonderful is that we have all been promised the gift of the Holy Spirit. *God's presence in us* is the promise we are given in our baptism. And if we will pay attention, and open ourselves as Mary and Elizabeth did, and (I want to say) even as old Zechariah surely did, we too can know the joy, the comfort, and the intimacy of God's presence.

The ancient church in the fifth century bestowed upon Mary the title "Theotokos" -- "Mother of God" -- for the role she played in bearing the divine presence into the world. She became a sign to the world that God is in our midst -- not just way back when, but now and always, and that we and all people have the ability to be bearers of God into the world.

The Medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart, said that "We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly, but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my

culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of Man is begotten in us.” (Meister Eckhart -- 1260-1328)

This is the fullness of time. We and people throughout the world will celebrate the birth of this child this week. But we will have missed the whole point if we think it is only about remembering something that happened a long time ago in a faraway place. He must be born in us, as he was in Mary. And our eyes, like Elizabeth’s – and even the child in her – must be awakened to the presence of the holy in the person standing next to us.

This is the mystery we await. This... is what it means to know “God with us.”