

## Fourth Sunday of Advent: Women of Prophecy, People of Prophecy

Today's Gospel presents two pregnant women, Mary and Elizabeth, in that wonderful meeting we refer to as the Visitation. The Angel Gabriel told Mary what God's plan was for her, and she accepted the hand of God in her life, "*Behold the handmaid of the Lord.*" Gabriel also told her about her kinswoman, Elizabeth, an older lady who was now with child. Mary knew that she had to go to Elizabeth. Why? To help Elizabeth with the childbirth? Probably not. After all, Elizabeth was the wife of the priest Zechariah who was high enough in rank to be chosen to offer the sacrifice in the Holy of Holies. There had to be plenty of women around Elizabeth to help her. Why then did Mary proceed with haste to the hill country of Judah to be with Elizabeth? Mary must have understood that God wanted her to be there before John the Baptist would be born. Elizabeth was in her sixth month. Mary had to hurry. She had to travel from Nazareth in Galilee to the hill country of Judea. Perhaps her parents, Anne and Joachim, joined her on the dangerous trip. Or maybe it was Joseph, her betrothed. We really don't know other than she could not have gone on the journey alone. Somehow Mary knew that it was part of God's plan for the two pregnant women to allow the babies they were carrying to come close to each other. Elizabeth said that as soon as she heard Mary's greeting the baby within her leaped for joy. This was more than John giving his mother, Elizabeth, a good kick. Some spiritual writers posit that his proximity to the about-to-be born Jesus resulted in the Holy Spirit coming upon the soon-to-be born John.

I would like to speak about Mary and Elizabeth as women of prophecy.

The prophecy of Mary's role began in *Genesis*. The wise scholars of *Genesis*, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, wrote that immediately after the Fall, after Eve convinced Adam that they should eat the fruit of pride, arrogance and disobedience, and be like gods themselves, as the serpent said they would be, immediately God said that another woman would come whose child would destroy the power of evil in the world, the hold of the devil. This woman, of course, was Mary. As time went on the prophet Isaiah declared to King Ahaz that God would give a special sign to the House of David. A virgin would be with child. She will have a son. He will be named Immanuel. It was quite clear that she would be a virgin and yet would be pregnant.

The mystery of how this could happen was solved in the fullness of time. I love that phrase *fullness of time*. It means when God, the One who was beyond time, says the time was right in the economy of salvation. The angel appeared to Mary, and Mary agreed to allow the prophecy to be fulfilled in her. The fact that Mary was a common, everyday Hebrew girl, not a princess in a palace, was significant. As Mary would tell Elizabeth, she, a lowly servant of God, would be raised up. All generations would call her blessed. Only God could do this. To this day we call her the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The ancient prophets did not predict anything that referred directly to Elizabeth, but Elizabeth was firmly part of the Biblical tradition of very special women. Like Isaac's mother, Sarah, like Samson's mother, the wife of Manoah, like Samuel's

mother, Hanna, Elizabeth, a woman past child bearing years, would be chosen so that her child could demonstrate from the very beginning of his life the miraculous hand of God. This child was to have a significant role in God's plan for the salvation of mankind. Isaiah said that one would come who would be a voice in the wilderness calling out, "Prepare the way of the Lord." In the very last words of Hebrew Scripture, the Old Testament, Malachi prophesied, "Lo, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the day of the Lord comes, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children and children to their fathers." John the Baptist came just like Elijah, in the wilderness, wearing clothing made of camel's hair, a leather belt, and eating locusts and wild honey. His baptism called fathers to look to their children's future and prepare the way of the Lord. He taught children to look to the new wisdom of their fathers and prepare to meet their Savior.

Mary and Elizabeth were participants in the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God. Elizabeth's child would point to Mary's child and call him the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. The birth, life, death and resurrection of Mary's child would be the central event of human history. Prophets said that a Messiah would come. Prophets said that one would come who would prepare the way of the Lord.

We are the benefactors of the prophecy. We are the people God came to save. We are the people called to usher in the End Times, the day of the Lord. We are to proclaim with our lives that the Kingdom of God is upon us.

Behold! Behold the birth of John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament Prophets and the first of the New Testament Prophets. Behold the birth of Jesus. Behold the one whom all of creation is calling out to come.

This is the mystery that excites us. It is the same mystery that excited Mary and Elizabeth. They realized that they had each in their own way been chosen to be vehicles of God's plan of love. Elizabeth's son, John the Baptist, would point to this Love become flesh. Jesus, Mary's son, would be this love. We also have been chosen to be part of this plan by the One who loves us and who calls us to make His Love a reality for others.

God is the King. He is the Divine Lover. We are the object of His love. Only God would love so much that He would become one of us to win our love. St. Irenaeus, an early doctor of the Church, wrote, "Because of his great love for us, Jesus, the Word of God, became what we are in order to make us what he is himself."

With deep gratitude we pray: Lord of all love, you have come to us so we can come to you. You have become physical so we can become spiritual. You have embraced us with your Love so we can embrace others with your love. We thank you for choosing us to be part of your plan. We thank you for allowing us to join Mary and Elizabeth in the excitement of your Coming Presence. We ask you now to give us the strength and the courage to proclaim your Presence with our Lives.

There might be only a few days left, but: Happy Advent,