

Fourth Advent, Year C
December 20, 2009
Good Shepherd

Micah 5:2-5a
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-55

Hildegard of Bingen wrote:

The soul is kissed by God
in its innermost regions.
With interior yearning,
grace and blessing
are bestowed.
It is a yearning to take on God's gentle yoke
It is a yearning to give one's self to God's way.

While Hildegard was not speaking specifically about the mother of Jesus one can't help but see here an association. We know that in Mary's encounter with the Angel at the Annunciation, her soul was indeed kissed by God in its innermost regions, as God began to knit together divinity and humanity in Mary's womb. She truly conceived God in her heart, as Henri Nouwen says, before she conceived God in her body. And Mary's assent to bear in her body, God's own Messiah, was the source of grace and blessing with which her kinswoman, Elizabeth, greeted Mary's Visitation. Furthermore, if you would allow me to continue to free associate with Hildegard's words, I would suggest that the yearning to take on God's gentle yoke and to give one's self to God's way might offer us a lens for viewing this Advent remembrance of the visitation between Mary and Elizabeth as part of our own story of faith.

In Orthodox Christianity there is a great devotion to Mary and so one finds many, many icons depicting her in various roles and scriptural references. In churches named for John the Baptist, almost always there is an icon or painting or fresco commemorating Mary's visitation to her kinswoman Elizabeth. Last year on pilgrimage, Barry and I visited Ein Karem, the Palestinian village, reportedly of John the Baptist. There, at the Church of the Visitation one

fresco in particular captures the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth in a most revealing manner. Two women, not only kinsfolk, but now drawn together by the common experience of pregnancy, meet in an unnamed village in the hills of Judea. Elizabeth is shown almost as an old crone. She is dressed in brown, and she's stout. She bends in a gesture of deference as Mary approaches. The figure of Mary is tall, lithesome, youthful, full of movement. She is dressed in radiant blue and white and gold. In regal manner she extends her hand as if she were lifting Elizabeth from her position of obeisance. This depiction of the story of the Visitation as a study in contrasts, which is certainly the gospel writer's intent, is clearly captured in this fresco.

The woman in brown is old and her son will be the last of the prophets of the Old Covenant. The woman in blue is young and her son is the embodiment of the New Covenant. Yet, as Luke would have it, both are pregnant with possibility. Life gestates in the Hebrew Covenant as well as the New.

We can also see this encounter as a meeting between the wise old woman and the virginal and innocent soul. The archetypes of both crone and virgin lead us more deeply into the roots of God's feminine wisdom, and into our own, as well. Elizabeth and Mary are aspects of *our* souls and they have many things to tell us. Elizabeth is the voice of experience and wisdom. Life and waiting have aged her. She is no longer young and attractive. As a result, especially in our youth-worshipping culture, she is disregarded, if she is even seen at all. And so the voice of her experience is ignored. When we do this in our own souls, often it means that we don't pay attention to the unattractive, worn, slow and shuffling parts of others, and ourselves. By so doing we may miss the voice of wisdom.

Elizabeth has been barren until her old age. But now by God's activity, new life gestates within her. As a metaphor for our souls, the Holy Spirit is telling us something very important

here: that if we use these characteristics of drawing on what we know, of waiting, of staying open to God's surprises, then, God can always start something new, something of the new life of his grace in us. By every stretch of the imagination, Elizabeth was "too old", but not by God's imagination. Have you ever found yourself using that defense - "I'm too old for that!"? What would have happened to John the Baptist if Elizabeth responded that way when Zechariah came home from the temple and told her about his encounter with the angel of John's annunciation? I wonder how many prophets of God's activity never get born in us because we haven't listened to the inner voice of the wise old woman.

We said this story is a study in contrasts, so let us look at the very different soul-image that Mary offers. She is young, beautiful, innocent, probably afraid, certainly by virtue of her pregnancy, an outcast. God has asked something of her that feels so far beyond her capacities. But she never said, "I can't do that! I don't know how! I don't want to do something that's socially unacceptable." Mary's faith in God enabled her simple "yes". It is this very faith that Elizabeth praises when she greets her kinswoman. As a soul image within us and a model of faith that we can carry into the world, Mary represents a profound trust in God. That trust reminds us that we can manage what looks impossible, because God is with us in the worst that can happen to us. Mary's trust can be the source of strength we draw upon to get us through hard, painful, even unjust things, because even in the most difficult circumstances God brings forth God's saving presence.

The choice of the encounter between Elizabeth and Mary as the Gospel for this Fourth Sunday of Advent, including Mary's hymn of Magnificat, telescopes the themes of Advent for us as we await the rebirth of wonder in the feast of Christmas - themes of waiting and preparation, promise and prophecy fulfilled, history turned upside down.

In Luke's telling of the visitation between the two women, it seems that the Spirit of Wisdom has informed Elizabeth, so that she knows before words are even uttered that Mary bears within her the world's Messiah. And this is not just any Lord for Elizabeth, but one with whom she is already in relationship. For her, Mary's baby is "my Lord". She, like the people of Israel has waited to receive the messiah. Through the long years of expectancy Elizabeth has come to know her God, has the experience of relationship with God. It is the *particularity of her knowing* God that enables her insight into the One whom Mary carries. Elizabeth blesses Mary not so much because of her motherhood, but more especially because of Mary's faith, the great leap of faith with which she said "yes" to God's high and preposterous plan for the salvation of the world.

Both Mary and Elizabeth stand for ideal Christians and as models for the whole community of faith. In the words of one commentator (Homily Service, v.30, #8, p.38) Mary proclaims the gospel and Elizabeth proclaims the proclaimer. Elizabeth, by the way, is the only woman allowed to make an explicit Christological confession in this Gospel, the only woman to say that Jesus is the Lord. Another important thing to note is that Elizabeth declares Mary as blessed, not for her role as mother but because of her faith: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Some of the worst of Marian devotion has projected the sentimentality about motherhood onto Mary the mother of God, thus eviscerating the power of her role as a model of faith. It is as a faith-filled woman that Mary is a model for Christians of all generations who, in apprehending *her* faith, can recognize our own faith as a blessing that calls us to incarnate Jesus in our choices, ideals, attitudes, and actions.

The real crux of this passage comes, of course, in Mary's canticle. Here we find bright confidence, a delicate delight in her "yearning to give herself to God's way," as Hildegard would say, a delight that sets the tone for the new era that is dawning. Here in the Magnificat we hear prophetic challenge, advocacy for the poor and the dispossessed, and the promises of God proclaimed to **all** that would be in relationship with him. Sounds to me like an agenda for the highest designs of Christian living, and a model of profound faith.

There are a couple of interesting themes in the Magnificat that relate particularly to the work of a man or woman of faith. The first is that in this canticle God is portrayed in terms of what God has done, because what God has done is what God will do. Often when the past tense is used in scripture it is to express hope for the future. Part of the Christian's job is the proclamation of this hope to a world where hope is in short supply.

Secondly, God's justice and mercy are presented in terms of reversals for the proud and the humble, the mighty and the lowly, the rich and the poor. Such reversals remind us that the God we serve is a God of paradox, a God who doesn't always see things the way we do. Paradox is God's way of keeping us on our toes. God uses what humanity often regards as useless. And God's action is usually taking place on the fringe of things that most people would consider "proper". On this Fourth Sunday of Advent we are, of course, being prepared for the sublime paradox of the infinite God emptying God's self to take on human form.

But the real link between this passage and the work of Christian faith comes with Mary's proclamation that all generations will call her blessed – not because of any intrinsic personal holiness or merit but because of the one whom she is bearing. She is, in the tradition that comes to us from Orthodox Christianity, "Theotokos", God-bearer. In Greek it is the highest title that a human being has ever received, and in the Eastern Church Mary is revered as the God-bearer.

We also are God-bearers, by virtue of our baptism. The task for all of us is to be pregnant with the presence of God in the midst of the best and the worst that both the world and God's people can do.

Mary and Elizabeth are we, every one of us. They meet today in the hill town of our souls. They meet to remind us of our calling as God's Christians and the precious faith with which we are pregnant. They remind us that Hildegard's words describe God's coming to birth in each one of us, for indeed:

The soul is kissed by God
in its innermost regions.

With interior yearning,
grace and blessing
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It is a yearning to take on God's gentle yoke
It is a yearning to give one's self to God's way.