

December 19, 2021
Fourth Sunday of Advent
Luke 1:39-45

During those days Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."



Background

The Gospel for this Sunday follows immediately after Luke's description of Mary accepting the invitation to be the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:26-38). Some have suggested that Mary went to visit Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist, in order to help Elizabeth. But Luke reports that Mary left Elizabeth before John was born. "Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home. When the time arrived for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a son." (Luke 1:56-57) Therefore Mary would be leaving Elizabeth during that period when she would have needed the most assistance.

Luke's gospel does not indicate a precise location from which Mary left, or the town to which she went. This would seem to indicate that it was both an insignificant place and not important for what he wants his community to know. But what Luke's community would notice is that Mary seems to be making the four-day journey alone. Women in this culture were always in the company of other women, children, and/or a male protector. For Mary, a fourteen-year-old girl, to travel alone would be enough to accuse her of being of shameful character. Yet the text calls Mary "blessed" three different times: for her unique role in God's plan, and for her faith in God. On one hand the details that Luke includes seem to cast Mary in a rather suspicious light, yet he strongly asserts that she is blessed.

Reflection Questions

1. When you are told that a couple is expecting, what are some of the thoughts and feelings that rise within you?
2. What are some of the thoughts and feelings you have as you hear that Mary set out for the hill country to visit her cousin Elizabeth, whom the angel has told her is also with child?
3. Luke's gospel here focuses on Elizabeth's greeting of Mary, but Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months. What are some of things they might have talked about during that time?

4. Luke's portrait of Mary emphasizes her faith and her willingness to do things that might cast her in a poor light before others. How does this view of Mary fit with your image of Mary?
5. Both Mary and Elizabeth are women who are unlikely to become pregnant, or to be significant figures in the religious or political world of their day, yet they play central roles in our understanding of our faith history. How does that reality speak to you today?
6. Can you talk to God now about how God used Mary and Elizabeth to reveal God's desire to bring Jesus into the world, or about your own desire to be an instrument of God's presence in your world, or about some other thought that this gospel raised within you?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM.
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