

Advent 3B. December 17, 2023. Faith Episcopal Church, Poulsbo, WA. Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11. “Canticle 15” (Luke 1:47-55). I Thessalonians 5:16-24. John 1:6-8, 19-28.

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.
For I the LORD love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.
I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,

as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

Canticle 15 The Song of Mary *Magnificat Luke 1:46-55*

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.
He has mercy on those who fear him *
in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm, *
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, *
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things, *
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has come to the help of his servant Israel, *
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
The promise he made to our fathers, *
to Abraham and his children forever.

Added response: Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: *
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. *Amen.*

The Gospel

John 1:6-8,19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness
to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not
the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

The Sermon

Two totally unexpected pregnancies!

Elizabeth and Zechariah, elders of their village, two thousand years ago, had grieved and eventually given up having the blessing of children. Zechariah returns home one day from his temple duties in Jerusalem, struck dumb by what he experienced in the inner holy space of the temple. He has been told by an angelic presence that he would have a child and to name him John. The Gospel-writer Luke names this messenger “Gabriel” who claims to “stand in the presence of God.” Zechariah hears that his child John will be filled with the holy Spirit even before his birth. Zechariah and Elizabeth find a way – a way of love -- and, in their old age, they become pregnant for the first time. Totally unexpected!

Young Mary, in the obscure town of Nazareth, has also had a visit from a presence, a light from God. “Hail, Mary, full of grace,” she hears, which totally perplexes the girl. “You will have a child whose kingdom will last forever,” says this Gabriel.

Awestruck, Mary answers, “Let it be. Let it be with me according to your word.”

But we have to wonder what questions troubled her, a young, unmarried girl, unsure as to what her fiancé Joseph would say when he found out. She may have been terrified. Elizabeth, too, must have been frightened at the unusual physical changes she was experiencing – today women only in their late 30s are called “geriatric pregnancies.”

Full of questions, Mary travels by foot to visit her aged cousin Elizabeth. When she arrives, she sees Elizabeth's state and hears her cousin say, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb." (Luke 1:42) Totally unexpected words.

Wow! Can you even try to imagine the conversation between these two?

Walt Wangerin (in the Book of God) imagines the encounter between the two women like this. Mary asks, "'You know about me?' Elizabeth begins to cry. 'Mary, I know what child is in you right now. As soon as you spoke to me, the babe in my own womb jumped for joy, and that was a prophecy. Oh, sweetheart, blessed are you...'"

"Gently Elizabeth urged her to sit, then she knelt down before Mary, and the two women gazed at each other, one whose hair, all white, was gathered in a braid, the other whose hair hung all around her shoulders like a black cape." Perhaps Mary will assist Elizabeth's midwife before she returns to Nazareth.

"Mary whispered, 'Things are changing, Elizabeth! I think God is turning the whole world upside down. What do you think?...God is lifting up the little people, a lowly maid like me, Elizabeth. He is blessing me! Next he will knock the mighty from their thrones! And hungry people will eat, and rich people will go hungry! Things are changing! I know it. The world will not be the same tomorrow. Does anyone else know this too?'"

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This is the origin story of the poem we call "The Magnificat," Song of Mary. Set to music hundreds of times, lyrical, woeful, longing, strong, faithful. We prayed it as our psalm this morning. It's frightening to hear this resistance song about scattering the proud, casting down the mighty, sending the rich away in empty hunger. For we can be proud, we live in a mighty nation, we are rich enough not to be hungry very often.

Can we claim lowliness or hunger or worthiness of God's providing? No, we can't.

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A bunch of confirmation kids I once taught acted out this song in front of the congregation one Wednesday evening in Advent years ago. They wheeled in a cart full of donuts and hot apple cider and started to serve the people. A large man in a tux came in and pushed his way forward to get his share first. According to the text, "the rich were sent away empty," and the kids sent him away empty. Sad and

angry, the richly dressed man stormed to the back of the church. After all had been served, however, the kids went back and guided him to the front, served him and seated him among the others.

A bit of a change to Mary's song, but a good one. Not one of us is worthy of the richness of God's grace; yet every one of us receives it. Every one of us is welcomed into the congregation of the children of God. Every one of us is welcome at Jesus' table of the Eucharist. Every one of us hears words of forgiveness and blessing each week, and each moment of each day if we listen! "His mercy is on those who fear God in every generation." Fear means deep respect and awareness.

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Zechariah and Elizabeth's boy John grew up as promised, full of the Holy Spirit. He helped prepare the world for Jesus' arrival. John said who he was partly by saying who he was not: not Elijah, not the prophet. Not the Messiah.

Our church can do the same. We're not Faith of the 90s, Faith of the 2000s or Faith of the 2020s. We are Faith in the coming year of our Lord 2024 – looking forward to every instance of Christ's coming to the dark world in which we live. We are being prepared for what God will do among us in the coming year.

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Critics asked John, "Why are you doing what you are doing?" John's answer to that question wasn't recorded for us. Instead, we read his words, "Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." He pointed to Jesus.

We may ask ourselves, "Why are you doing what you are doing?" What do we take with us this morning from these ancient stories?

If we are old like Zechariah and Elizabeth, will we be faithful and believing like they were? Quietly keeping on keeping on to raise a child in their old age, to find new ways of spiritual response? If we are young like Mary, will we be hopeful and dream of God setting the world right? Will we answer as Mary did in her song, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Did her words of joy, awe and resistance help form Jesus' upbringing?

This Advent, this lifetime, we are not just waiting for December 24, or 25, or 31. Perhaps we wait for a time when a God who is at once inside us and also impossibly far away will finally be seen face to face.

“Among us stands one” who is the Christ.

What blessing might we expect this season – whether we are old, young, empty or full? What might we be called to answer, how might we be called to respond to God’s grace?

Wait and see. Isaiah proclaimed that the Lord God would cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all nations. May it be so. With God all totally unexpected things are possible. Amen.