

Sermon, Fourth Sunday of Advent, St. David's Episcopal, 12/19/2021 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Here we are in Advent 4 already! We have already had our two John the Baptist Sundays, and now it's Mary's turn, although John does get a small role in today's Gospel, in utero.

Mary and Elizabeth's meeting after Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel takes on new meaning in our second pandemic season of Advent. Last year on the fourth Sunday of Advent, we had just been shut down again, and I was in this room preaching to a camera, streamer, and two musicians instead of to actual, embodied people, physically present with me. While things are not "back to normal," and I have no idea what normal will ever be again, some of us are here, together, and I think about Mary, after an angel—some kind of ethereal heavenly being—spoke to her about impossible things. Her instinct was not to pray quietly in her room. Her instinct was to seek out her much older cousin Elizabeth, who, Gabriel had told her, was also, impossibly, pregnant.

Mary went "with haste" to a Judean town in the hill country. Before this year, I had not thought about how, after the visitation, she longed to be physically present with another person. I had also not thought about how Mary "set out and went with haste." *With haste*. In Advent I try to tell all of us not to rush around, and I know that such preaching never works for me as the preacher. I spend Advent rushing around. Budget meetings, extra bulletins, extra sermons, extra everything. Gifts and wrapping and shipping and decorating and visiting. When I preach at you to slow down, I inwardly roll my eyes because how are we supposed to do that? I can't believe how hastily this Advent has sped by. I feel like I finally found my blue chasuble—my favorite of the church's collection of beautiful handcrafted chasubles—and it's already time to hang it back up until next year. Advent is so short: but not as short as Christmas, that even shorter season for which we are waiting.

Mary went with haste to see her older cousin, someone she probably looked up to. They were both in unusual situations. They were both unexpectedly expecting a child: Elizabeth was post-menopausal, and Mary was not yet married. Both of these pregnancies were impossible, except, as Gabriel had just told Mary, nothing will be impossible with God.

John the Baptist leaped with joy in Elizabeth's womb as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's voice. Elizabeth must have felt joyful, too, which may be surprising. Elizabeth was the respectable wife of a priest, while Mary was an unmarried knocked-up teenager. But these women then spent three months together. Three months.

Normally when this passage comes up I want to study the Magnificat with you all and point out how subversive and strong Mary was, but this year I am struck by what their encounter says about church. About how we need other faithful people. About being physically present to each other. About sharing one another's joys and serving as a comfort and support to each other.

The past two years have taken a toll on our community and church communities across the country. Guidance seems to be ever-changing, and now with vaccines and boosters and variants, knowing that mask-wearing is hard on my one-and-a-half lungs, I'm stumped about what to do anymore. This is not an invitation for you to tell me your good ideas. I love you, and I do not

want to hear them. We have as many ideas in here as we have people, and we all have different risk tolerances and experiences.

Churches are not unique in our current difficulties of fewer people gathering physically. Gary recently read me a column from the Wall Street Journal about how movie-watching has changed. People don't feel comfortable in theatres. The audience skews older, and older people are most at risk during the pandemic. And, we've shifted how we watch movies in our culture, something that had started before the pandemic, but the pandemic sped it up. People watch movies at home. When a new film opens, it's OK: they can catch it at home soon enough, at their own convenience.

Sounds something like church, doesn't it? When Gary was reading the article he said, "I could just substitute church for movies for a lot of this."

So what does it matter for today's reading?

Church is not a performance, even though it may seem like that sometimes, when I am up here in a robe, preaching at you and waving my hands over stuff that you then get to consume. Church is people. Where two or three are gathered, remember.

We are the church. The person next to you, in front of you, behind you, across the aisle: we are all the church. Not the building. Not the screen.

Mary and Elizabeth were spiritual friends who gathered together and shared religious ruminations, after they had separate religious experiences. They supported each other and inspired each other. Elizabeth exclaimed when she saw Mary and told her about baby John jumping. Mary responded with the Magnificat, which has inspired oppressed people for millennia.

These women were not powerful. Elizabeth was the wife of a priest, but she had been barren for so long that people must have whispered about her. Poor Zechariah, they probably said, with that barren old woman. But now she was pregnant. And people certainly would have whispered about unmarried pregnant Mary, even after Joseph married her anyway. But they comforted each other and inspired each other as they met together, in person.

What can we take from this story of these two women? What are we doing as a church? Are we running around trying to create the perfect secular Christmas, or are we making haste to spend time here, with our spiritual friends?

And what do we inspire each other to do? When we are stirred by a sister or brother in Christ, do we tell them, like Elizabeth told Mary about John?

And if spiritual sister or brother enthusiastically greets us in the name of the Lord, how do we respond? Mary didn't speak to just her experience, but to that of the poor and oppressed. What are we doing to make a more beautiful life for others?