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St. John's Episcopal Church

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Advent IV/C

BLESSED IS SHE

"Just because it didn't happen doesn't mean it isn't true." (Tim O'Brien)

"A people is never defeated until the hearts of the women are on the ground." (Cheyenne saying)

After cacophonous cries of fire and judgment come silence and gentle melody. After John the Baptist's harsh, masculine predictions of threshing floors, apocalypse and axes savaging the roots of trees ...comes something feminine, gentle, hopeful ... the story of Elizabeth and Mary. After the strident demands of a male prophet come female prophets, Mary and Elizabeth, with something to say that is more open, more life-giving and less aggressive. The contrast to the preceding weeks of Advent couldn't be sharper. When I think of John the Baptist's dire warnings, I imagine one of those disaster movies where people are running terrified just barely escaping (or not) collapsing buildings, or fires or tornadoes or tidal waves. I can also easily imagine holiday shoppers on "Super Saturday" frantically running around malls after seeing the forecast of a big winter storm on its way.

Alongside of John the Baptist's dread and pandemonium stands something different. What follows is reminiscent of the Sarajevo cellist who brought a spirit of peace and courage to a city under bombardment. At the doorstep of Elizabeth's home Mary has arrived after a long and perhaps dangerous journey alone.

*In *The First Christmas*, by Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan, the authors point out that in the ancient world, and perhaps in ours too, everyone wanted peace. There was peace through military victory and conquest, like Caesar's Pax Romana. And there was a peace brought about by God's dominion. This latter is the peace of which Micah and Isaiah write, where swords are turned into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks. History's catacombs are filled with the bones of peace by conquest and domination. When a leader or nation believes the cause for going to war is just, it is hard to see that the choice of violence nearly always begets more suffering and violence.*

In today's readings we get a sense of what God's reign of peace might be. It is tempting to sentimentalize the stories of Elizabeth and Mary, but gentleness should not be read as weakness, nor obedience as submissiveness. We are familiar with Mary's response to the angel Gabriel, "Let it be with me according to your word." Another translation of the Greek is, "Let me become what you have called me to be." In either case, Mary is not meek.

*The first three chapters of Luke's gospel contain radical political assertions in the face of the imperial Roman Empire. Mary's song, which we know as *The Magnificat*, sets the tempo.*

Borg and Crossan point out that the first few chapters in Matthew and Luke are "overtures" that establish central motifs that will run throughout their entire gospels. In Luke's case, the motifs are women, the Holy Spirit, and the vindication of the marginalized.

((Before Gabriel visits Mary, he first calls upon Zechariah. Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth, is a descendant of Aaron, Moses' brother. Like Abraham and Sarah, this couple is old and childless. But, "They are righteous before God." (Without the benefit of modern science) Elizabeth is ashamed because she is barren. Gabriel comes

to Zechariah and tells him that Elizabeth will have a son who will be called John. Zechariah is terrified. Gabriel tries to reassure him. "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard...you will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at John's birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord."

This is too much good news for Zechariah. Change can be unsettling. Even really great news can throw one into a tailspin. Zechariah asks, "How will I know this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." These are reasonable questions.

Gabriel's response seems harsh.

"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words ... you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

Maybe Gabriel was having a bad day. However, Zechariah's imposed silence does make way for the voices of the two female principals, Elizabeth and Mary.))

Why does Mary run to her older kinswoman who has been in seclusion for 6 months, since the beginning of her pregnancy? Perhaps this pregnant teenager was afraid and needed a mother figure, an older woman she knew and could trust, a woman who would be a mentor to her in the months ahead. Their reunion is filled with joy, affection and spirit.

Imagine them at Elizabeth's doorstep. They have just exchanged warm embraces and kisses.

"When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

In this story, there are four people in communication: Mary and Elizabeth, and Jesus and John the Baptizer, still in the wombs of their mothers. The baby John jumps in Elizabeth's womb. He will be born before baby Jesus, just as he goes before the adult Jesus to prepare a way for him. Elizabeth refers to the child in Mary's womb as her "Lord", clearly anticipating a future time. "What greeting might wake you, causing you to leap in your confined space? How might it feel to be so awakened, to recognize and respond with all your self to an unknown voice?" (Caroline Wohlforth)

After Elizabeth's magnificent greeting, comes one of the masterpieces of the New Testament, the Magnificat. Mary's song, as some call it, established Luke's motif of God's vindication of the poor and powerless. Justice is integral to peace. After praising God and acknowledging that future generations will call her blessed, Mary reveals a strength and sacred purpose that could only be understood by Rome as subversive and treasonous. She speaks of the reign of God's peace in which the proud are scattered in the thoughts of their hearts and the powerful are brought down from their thrones. The tables are turned in this kingdom; the lowly are lifted up, the hungry are filled with good things, and the rich sent empty away.

*To understand how radical, revolutionary and dangerous these words were, we must first be aware of the brutality of Herod the Great. Under Herod's reign the poor were taxed so heavily that they lost their land. Losing their lands meant losing everything. The taxes were used to pay for Herod's luxurious villas, fortresses and the Temple in Jerusalem. Wealth was concentrated at the top leaving the masses impoverished. Writing for *The Christian Century*, John Ortberg, writes that Herod knew that people would celebrate after his death. One story describes 70 elite Jewish citizens imprisoned with orders to be executed on the day of Herod's death so that there would tears in Israel on that day.*

*With this kind of regime, we can see that Mary's song, in addition to being beautiful, is also highly political. During the 1980s, the recitation or singing of *The Magnificat* was banned by the government of Guatemala because the authorities worried that it might incite oppressed people to riot or revolt. In base communities poor people heard the good news of a God who did not want their*

husbands or sons to be “disappeared” or their children to die of hunger or their daughters lost to poverty.

In the few verses we have focused on, Luke sets forth the distinctive motifs of his gospel; the powerful roles of women, the inspiration and empowerment of the Holy Spirit and God’s special love for the marginalized. On Christmas Eve, we will hear Luke point to the political and historical context in which all these remarkable things take place, that context being a nation under the cruel occupation of the Roman Empire.

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.”

We tend to hear these words with nostalgia rather than with an awareness of their subversive intent. Could we imagine hearing them both ways? In a world where fear often reigns, these words are a beautiful and revolutionary announcement of the peace for which God and we long.

Luke 1:39-56

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to

me?⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”