



# Advent Through the Eyes of Those Who Waited

## SESSION 4

*The prophetic tradition continues with Elizabeth's greeting of Mary and Mary's song of praise to God.*

### Two New Prophets

Advent began with words from the ancient prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures, specifically Isaiah. Then we moved to the New Testament to get acquainted with the prophet John the Baptist, who was the herald of the Messiah. Following that wrinkle in time, we ventured back to ponder with Mary the announcement of the angel Gabriel. We return to Mary on this last week of Advent and we meet Elizabeth, the mother of John. These two women, chosen by God to bear amazing babies, take us by the hand as we draw close to Christmas Day. Moving to the next story in Luke's Gospel, Fred Craddock invites us to imagine the annunciations of John and Jesus as two panels of material united in the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth told only by Luke.<sup>1</sup> Think of these stories as a triptych, with the annunciation stories on the right and left sides and a picture of Elizabeth greeting Mary in the center. These two women encourage us to slow down during this last week of Advent and join them in conversation as they and we wait for God to come among us.

### An Urgent Visit

Read Luke 1:39–56, the story of the visitation of Mary and Elizabeth. Mary went with haste, wasting no time after the visit of Gabriel, to go to Elizabeth. Wait, a young woman setting off by herself for a lengthy visit? What is going on? Joel B. Green interjects, "Within her social world, Mary has a script to follow. This script would involve her relative seclusion, not a journey of some seventy miles (no chaperone or traveling companions



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are mentioned in Luke!).<sup>2</sup> And did she confer with her family or tell Joseph? What an impetuous act!

Some suppose that Mary took this bold step because she wanted to see if the news of Elizabeth's pregnancy was true. However, given that she seemed to accept the rest of Gabriel's message without hesitation, why would she feel the need to check on Elizabeth's condition? Most commentators on this passage, especially women, point out the overwhelming desire for pregnant women to find other pregnant women, to share their experiences and their dreams for their babies. And wouldn't two women, blessed by God with special babies in their wombs, have a lot to talk about? This three-month visit began with a theological exchange, both women speaking of God and God's wondrous acts. Imagine the conversations that must have followed as they cooked, washed clothing, and cared for one another.

Returning to Luke 1:24 we recall that Elizabeth, once pregnant, went into seclusion for five months. This older woman (how old we really don't know) had grown used to her barrenness, but now she is having a baby, a son, a son so important that he was announced

by a messenger of God. Imagine all the months, even years, when Elizabeth prayed to God, asking what she had done to be denied motherhood, pleading for a child, bargaining with God as Hannah did until she had Samuel (1 Sam. 1). Each time a woman conceived and a child was born, Elizabeth must have sighed deeply, longing for her own baby. But now she has a husband who can't speak and she is pregnant! What a blessing, but what a suddenly upside-down world for her. She needs to talk with another woman who might understand. As Renita Weems points out, Elizabeth's blessing brings with it a lesson: learning how to accept a blessing so long in coming that it is no longer expected. Mary, however, is faced with receiving a blessing that may bring more problems for her than it solves.<sup>3</sup>

Luke lets us know that Gabriel appeared before Mary in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy (1:26). Surely, of all women, Mary can appreciate Elizabeth's situation, given the unusual circumstances of their pregnancies. Yet their social circumstances were quite the opposite. Mary, an unmarried girl, has not been longing for a baby, well, certainly not yet. As she walked all those miles, what was she thinking? Did she wonder if Elizabeth would believe her story? Would Elizabeth welcome her visit? She certainly couldn't turn around and go back home immediately. Did she leave home because when she told Joseph about the angel's message, he needed some time to think about and get used to this strange story? Did her family encourage her to go away for a while? Yes, these two women had much on their minds and plenty to talk about. Where would they begin?

We are not left wondering whether Elizabeth will welcome Mary for long. As soon as Mary enters the house, Elizabeth's baby kicks in her womb, and the Holy Spirit comes upon her. She responds to Mary's arrival with joy and praise. The rest of the story is overtaken by the prophetic voices of the two women, the first to speak God's message of good news in Luke's narrative. After their greeting and recognition of God's work in their lives, the women settle down for a three-month visit. What joy, laughter, and tears they must have shared. Elizabeth's baby would have been due at the end of the three months, so perhaps Mary stayed with her until John was born. However, Mary is not mentioned anywhere in the story of his birth, so we can only deduce she attended his birth by Luke's careful attention to her time of departure.

## BARRENESS—AN UNWELCOME STATUS

Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, women plead with God for children. The childless family was nothing short of a disgrace, surely cursed by God. The story of Abraham and Sarah, who waited and waited for God's promise of many heirs to come true, is well known. The story of Hannah, whose praise to God is a model for the Magnificat, has already been mentioned. The stigma was always attached to the woman, as she is the one who gives birth.

While one child might take away the burden of barrenness, many children was truly a sign of God's blessing. The psalmist desired many children, and especially sons:

Sons are indeed a heritage from the LORD,  
the fruit of the womb a reward.  
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior  
are the sons of one's youth.  
Happy is the man who has  
his quiver full of them.

*Psalm 127:3–5*

## Two Women Prophets

Elizabeth, now filled with the Holy Spirit, immediately acknowledges Mary as one who is faithful and blessed by God to be the bearer of the Lord. (Luke regularly uses Lord to refer to the Messiah.) Here, according to Jane Schaberg, "Elizabeth makes the first and only christological confession by a woman in this Gospel."<sup>4</sup>

Mary responds to Elizabeth's bold prophecy with the Magnificat (called that from the word that begins this song of praise in the Latin Vulgate). This speech, the only one of such length attributed to a woman in Luke, sets Mary apart as a prophet too. She may even be considered the first theologian in the New Testament. Her silence before Gabriel and her pondering on the journey brought her to a song of praise and liberation equal to none.<sup>5</sup> In it we find a thread that is woven throughout Luke from this moment to Simeon's words to Mary in the temple to the words Jesus reads in the synagogue in Nazareth and throughout the teachings of Jesus, especially the parables with their upside-down view of life with God.

The Magnificat begins with Mary's praise to God for calling her to this special task, one for which generations to come will call her blessed. Then she describes what God will do, but she is so certain of this message that she speaks of it in the past tense. In other words, God has already done what God will do. Finally, she links her song to the covenant made so many generations before with Abraham and Sarah.

If this were a musical production, the spotlight would be on Mary with Elizabeth in the shadows at the side of the stage. Known as a great song of justice and liberation, the Magnificat speaks the theology that was put into action when God chose Mary to be the mother of the Messiah. Remember the young woman living in a town of no consequence? The one for whom Luke lists no attributes that make her a likely candidate for this mother of the Son of the Most High, the motherhood role of all times. Indeed, she is even called the Mother of God. What a strange choice, but then when did God select the most pious or most honored person among the people for the most important tasks?

This form of praise is not new to the people of God. In every study Bible, Mary's song of praise is compared



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to the praise Hannah gave to God in 1 Samuel 2 when she had Samuel. Hannah's song was likely to have been written later given its reference to a king when there was no king of Israel at that time. However, in it the barren woman is graced with seven children. The stomachs of the hungry are filled. The rich are brought low and the poor exalted. The needy sit in seats of honor. The tables are turned and all this will happen at the instigation of God.

But how do we sing this song with Mary? Mary identifies herself with the poor and lowly at the beginning of the Magnificat. Given the life realities of many on this planet, are we really able to stand with her? True, this song is sung in services of worship and prayer daily, but how do we enter into the beauty of the music and stay alive to the power of the words? For it is the words, not the melody, that call us in the twenty-first century. Patrick D. Miller points out that "The political character of Mary's song is heard in the claim that the work of the Lord of Israel is literally a revolutionary one, turning things upside down in the most radical way possible, accomplishing the impossible in the socioeconomic world of that time, and, indeed, of any time, utterly changing the structure of power and domination and economic access."<sup>6</sup> As the angel Gabriel reminds us, "For nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37).

## Advent and Two More Prophets

If Advent is a time that ends with the arrival of the awaited Messiah, whether in a manger or on the banks of Jordan River, how do these two women prophets help us bring this season to a close? Elizabeth calls upon us to acknowledge the Messiah with great joy and praise. Mary sends us into the world to see what God has done and is doing, and to participate in this work.

As we light the last candle on the Advent wreath, the candle of love, let us be overwhelmed by the great love

### THE MAGNIFICAT, LUKE 1:46-55

And Mary said,  
 "My soul magnifies the Lord,  
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness  
 of his servant.  
 Surely, from now on all generations will call  
 me blessed;  
 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
 and holy is his name.  
 His mercy is for those who fear him  
 from generation to generation.  
 He has shown strength with his arm;  
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts  
 of their hearts.  
 He has brought down the powerful from their  
 thrones,  
 and lifted up the lowly;  
 he has filled the hungry with good things,  
 and sent the rich away empty.  
 He has helped his servant Israel,  
 in remembrance of his mercy,  
 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
 to Abraham and to his descendants for ever."

## THE GROWING GAP BETWEEN THE RICH AND THE POOR

In an op-ed article for the *New York Times* (May 20, 2007), Bob Herbert reported that the United Way of New York, in a study on America's urban agenda, said: "The greatest single challenge most American cities face lies in the increasing divide between the haves and the have-nots."<sup>7</sup> He further noted that the number of families in homeless shelters in that city is the highest in twenty-five years. Others have reported increased use of homeless shelters and food pantries over the past two or three years, whether in small communities or densely populated urban areas.

A year after Herbert's piece was published, in an article about the consequences of the growing gap between the rich and the poor, we find these facts:

- In 1965, the average salary for a CEO of a major U.S. company was 25 times the salary of the average worker. Today, the average CEO's pay is more than 250 times the average worker.
- In 1975, the average college graduate's hourly wage was 24 percent higher than the average high-school graduate. By 2002, that number had risen to 43 percent.<sup>8</sup>

The Children's Defense Fund, a strong advocacy group for children and families, posts these statistics on its Web site:

Each day in America (based on calculations per school day, 180 days of seven hours each)

- 928 babies are born at low birthweight
- 2,145 babies are born without health insurance
- 2,483 babies are born into poverty
- 78 babies die before their first birthday
- 2,421 children are confirmed as abused or neglected<sup>9</sup>

that God has shown to each of these Advent figures and to us. May we respond as faithfully as they did.

### About the Writer

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### Endnotes

1. Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 24.
2. Joel B. Green, "Blessed Is She Who Believed," in Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Cynthia L. Rigby, *Blessed One* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 15.
3. Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away* (San Diego, CA: Lura-Media Press, 1988), 114, 117.
4. Jane Schaberg, "Luke," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 282.
5. Patrick D. Miller, "The Church's First Theologian," in *Theology Today*, October 1999. Miller also points out that Luke refers to Mary's theological pondering in 2:19 and 2:51. [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3664/is\\_199910](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3664/is_199910)
6. Ibid.
7. Bob Herbert, "American Cities and the Great Divide" in *The New York Times*, May 22, 2007. <http://select.nytimes.com/2007/05/22/opinion/22herbert.html>.
8. Elizabeth Gudrais, "Unequal America: Causes and Consequences of the Wide—and Growing—Gap Between the Rich and Poor," *Harvard Magazine*, July-August 2008. <http://harvardmagazine.com/2008/07/p-unequal-america.html>.
9. Children's Defense Fund, Washington, DC: <http://www.childrensdefense.org>.