

Sermon: Luke 1:39-49 (Advent 4C)
Christ Church Riverdale, 20 December 2009 (8:30 am only)
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Luke 1:39-56 ³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And 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." ⁴⁶ And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." ⁵⁶ And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

"It's always the darkest just before dawn," I was thinking yesterday afternoon as it was getting dark on the way toward official sunset at 4:30. In a few days we'll celebrate the dawning of the Light of the World. It's just before dawn for us, but in Luke's Gospel, it's a little less than nine months before the birth of Jesus. The Angel Gabriel has been making the rounds, first telling Elizabeth, and then Mary that they will each give birth to a son. When Mary gets the news, she heads out to see her relative Elizabeth. It's quite a schlep to the hill country of Judea, maybe 80 miles--so Elizabeth must've really been somebody Mary could confide in.

When Mary gets to Elizabeth's house, they're both in an embarrassing state-- pregnant, but embarrassed for different reasons. Now even though the Spanish word for "pregnant" is *embarazada* (but doesn't actually mean "embarrassed"), the embarrassment I'm talking about is not simply that they're expecting, but the circumstances of how they came to be that way. Elizabeth had long been considered to be what we would call infertile. The biblical word is less clinical than that; the biblical word is "barren," describing both the woman's physical state and her likely state of mind, since women not able to have children were considered almost nobodies--"barren."

Now Elizabeth *is* pregnant, but she and Zechariah are so old, that she must be *embarazada* indeed! And then there's Mary, far from being past the time when people would expect her to have children. It's just a little too soon in her life to be expecting a child, for people to celebrate with her rather than talk behind her back. But now Mary can spend some time away from wagging tongues with her wise and trusted relative, Elizabeth. I think of Elizabeth as the kind of

person Mary can count on to give her a big hug, tell her, “It’ll be OK, honey,” and brew up a pot of ginger tea to soothe Mary’s digestive system while they talk.

But instead of soothing Mary with a soft voice, Elizabeth cries out like she’s startled, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. Why . . . has the mother of my Lord come to me? My baby’s in here leaping for joy!” This is startling news, that God would come into the world—not just come into the world but come into the world through a poor young woman, a woman who could even have said, “No,” but in her obedience had the courage to say, “Yes.” “Blessed is she,” Elizabeth says, “who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” Which, being translated: “You’re blessed, Mary; you believed that what the Lord told you would happen. You had the courage to say, ‘Yes.’” Mary’s song, the *Magnificat*, which we had the privilege of joining in with her earlier in the service, praises God for what is good news not just to her, but good news to the humble, the lowly, and the hungry.

After that, Mary stays with Elizabeth about three months, and they probably have plenty of conversations over ginger tea during the rest of Mary’s first trimester. It’s always darkest just before dawn, and when Mary goes back home, I expect she’s stronger in her trust that dawn would come, strong enough to face her neighbors, and Joseph, strong enough to keep on trusting that God would fulfill the promise; strong enough to persevere in her obedience—to keep saying, “Yes!” to God. But just as we had the privilege of joining Mary in her song, so we also have the privilege of joining Mary in her humility, of joining in her courage, and of joining in her saying, “Yes!” to God.