

Waiting for Love's Arrival

This week, our Advent waiting nears its end as we light our final candle. Tradition refers to the fourth Advent candle as the Angels' Candle, and its theme is love. There are many things to love about the angels, and we'll talk about them when we gather on Christmas Eve. But this morning, I'd like to focus on someone who doesn't always get much attention, but who brings great love to the story of Jesus's birth: Elizabeth, Mary's cousin and, at this point in Luke's narrative, mother-to-be of John the Baptist.

Luke tells us that, right after her wondrous encounter with the Archangel Gabriel, Mary "went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country" where Elizabeth and her husband Zachariah lived. Luke allows us to imagine that, upon hearing from Gabriel that Elizabeth was about six months pregnant, Mary went to help Elizabeth prepare for the baby's birth. After all, Mary stayed with Elizabeth and Zachariah for three months, returning home well before her own due date. I can't help but wonder, though, whether Mary's parents played a role in her sudden departure from Nazareth. Although engaged to Joseph, Mary wasn't yet a married woman. Her pregnancy was in clear violation of Mosaic law. An unmarried girl who was found to be with child faced a very real risk of being stoned to death. That Mary could only explain her pregnancy by describing her private conversation with an archangel probably didn't help matters. Angels are everywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, but they typically appeared to warriors, builders, lawgivers, and prophets – in other words, to important men. Gabriel in particular was best known for his friendship with the venerable prophet Daniel, who famously manifested Adonai's grace by escaping unharmed from a fiery furnace and a den of ravenous lions. The idea that Gabriel, a prince of heaven, would stoop to conversation with a teenaged nobody from a little country town might well have been more than Mary's mother and father could swallow. And even if her

parents believed their daughter, they had reason to fear that the neighbors would not. Gossip flourishes in small communities. Perhaps her parents sent Mary off to visit her cousins in the hope of minimizing gossip and avoiding shame. Or perhaps Mary didn't wait for her parents to send her away. Tradition tells us that Mary traveled about a hundred miles to visit Elizabeth, and Luke doesn't say that anyone went with her. We can't know for sure, but perhaps Mary was impetuous enough to take off alone to see her cousins because she couldn't bear the idea of facing the stares and whispers back home.

Coincidentally, if there is such a thing as coincidence where the divine plan is concerned, Elizabeth and Zachariah might have been more likely than Mary's parents to believe her story because Zachariah had encountered Gabriel himself, just a few months earlier. Zachariah was a Pharisee who served in the Temple in Jerusalem. While not a high priest like Annas or Caiaphas, he was a prominent man. When Gabriel appeared to announce the impending birth of Zechariah's son, the boy who would grow up to be John the Baptist, Zachariah questioned the archangel, pointing out that he was elderly and Elizabeth was well past childbearing age. He wasn't wrong, but there must have been some trace of arrogance in his tone because Gabriel responded by striking Zachariah mute, which he didn't do when Mary asked a similar question. Perhaps she was more respectful than the Pharisee had been, or perhaps Gabriel knew better than to smite his boss' mother-to-be. Either way, Zachariah was entirely unable to speak until it was time to name his newborn son. Zachariah couldn't tell Elizabeth what happened for several months, but the idea that her little cousin Mary had been visited by that same powerful archangel should have been credible in light of Zachariah's own seraphic misadventure.

Zachariah doesn't appear in this morning's Gospel reading, perhaps because he couldn't contribute to the conversation. But what Elizabeth had to say to Mary was welcoming enough for

both of them. Any fear Mary might have had of being scolded or sent away must have evaporated with Elizabeth's Spirit-filled words. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb... And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Elizabeth lifted shame and doubt from Mary's shoulders, replacing them with loving admiration. She recognized Mary not as an unwed girl in trouble, but as the future queen of heaven. And that, my dear friends, is what love is all about.

Postmodern America has some very strange ideas about love. Hollywood churns out an endless river of romcoms where cute little people get into cute little squabbles that end with cute little happy endings that bear precious little resemblance to what marriage is actually like. We romanticize the love between parents and children, then heap blame on any parent whose child fails to meet certain societal ideals. We celebrate love between friends, but without encouraging people to invest time and effort into keeping their friendships alive, especially once they're out of high school. There are always money to be made, professional ladders to climb and work to be done. Spending time with friends can seem downright frivolous. Even in church, we urge our fellow Christians to love God as he loves us and love one another, but we don't necessarily explore what love looks like on those Sundays when the church roof springs a leak, the person in the next pew just sneezed for the third time in as many minutes, the sermon falls flat, and it feels like the Holy Trinity skipped out early to grab brunch before the line at IHOP got too long.

So, I think it's a shame that Bible scholars and preachers tend to skip over Elizabeth's words and go straight to Mary's Song, the Magnificat, when examining this passage. Mary's words, which we sang this morning, are an exquisite expression of Christian joy. They deserve all the attention as we can lavish upon them. But we can ask whether Mary would have been so joyfully eloquent without her cousin Elizabeth's loving affirmation. Elizabeth was completely

aware of Mary's scandalous condition, and still greeted her with reverence. She praised Mary and blessed her, giving her younger cousin the priceless gift of complete acceptance. She rejoiced in Mary's pregnancy with no concern for societal judgment. Put another way, Elizabeth behaved as if she loved Mary just as much and in the same way as God did, which gave Mary the perfect setting to beautifully express her own joy.

The phrase "unconditional love" has found its way into our 21st century conversations, but those words can be problematic. Human beings are endlessly concerned with their own needs and desires, which means that human love almost always comes with conditions, spoken or otherwise. That can actually be a good thing. In a world that is sometimes deceitful, cruel, and violent, some people can only be safely loved from a healthy distance away. But divine love is something different. Divine love is extravagant; it rejoices in who we are. Divine love embraces us, lifting away our pain and shame. Divine love welcomes us whenever and however we show up without giving two hoots what the neighbors think. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth lavished divine love on Mary and her baby. As she did, Elizabeth gave generations of faithful people a priceless gift. The "Hail, Mary" prayer, cherished by generations of Christians across the centuries, begins with Gabriel's greeting, but it continues with Elizabeth's beautiful blessing. You may not be in the habit of praying to Mary; a lot of Episcopalians don't. But if you ever want to make friends with Jesus's mother, reciting Elizabeth's blessing is a terrific way to begin.

In just two days, our Advent wait will end. With music, flowers, and glowing candles we'll celebrate the return of our Savior. In welcoming Mary with such heartfelt delight, Elizabeth teaches us how to welcome the baby Jesus just as joyfully. May the Holy Spirit fill your hearts to the brim with divine love this Sunday, and may the hope, peace, joy, and love of Advent linger with you in the coming days and the year ahead. God bless you, friends. Amen.