

Let it be: Luke 1:39-55

December 13, 2003

When I was a small boy in Ireland my parents would take us to our grandfather's farm near Castlecomer in County Kilkenny. On the farm there was a hired man whose name was John Brennan.

John lived in a thatched cottage about half a mile away. In the evening after the cows were milked, he would sit on a large flat stone outside the stable door and smoke a stained clay pipe. Sometimes I would sit beside him and he would tell me stories.

One story John told me I never forgot. He told me to look up into the sky. Summer evenings in Ireland are very long. The moon had appeared, still ghostlike because the light of the sun was not fully gone. Here and there, the odd star could be seen.

"Do you know?" said John, puffing on his pipe, "Do you know that the stars and the sun and moon move around all the time?" I said I did. "Well," said John, "do you know how the angel Gabriel came to Mary the mother of our Lord to tell her she would have a child?" I said I did. "Well then," said John, looking skyward as he spoke, with my eyes following his gaze, "Do you know that when the angel asked Mary if she would bear the holy child, all the stars and the sun and the moon stopped moving until she gave Gabriel her reply? And when she said yes, they all began to move again. Did you know that?" said John triumphantly.

There were two messages from the angel. The first was that Mary herself would bear a child. The second was that her cousin to the south was already six months pregnant. This second piece of news seems to have led Mary to decide to take an extraordinary journey. That she should travel at all, considering how her own world had just been exploded by the angel's news, is extraordinary. Her taking such a trip creates many questions. Did she share the news of her pregnancy with Joseph before leaving? Did she intend to stay away as long as she did? Luke tells us she stayed three months. We do not know if she traveled alone. More likely she looked for traveling company, perhaps a trade caravan. Perhaps the journey to see Elizabeth was merely an excuse to get away, at least for a while, and deal with the

upheaval in her world. Perhaps she hoped to avoid the neighbors' comments until she herself could get used to the news.

Her reception is everything she could have hoped for. Excited and exhausted, Mary arrives at the small town and finds the house of Zechariah. Luke tells us she entered the house, but we long for details, as with any story that fascinates us. Maybe Elizabeth was resting. After all, she was six months on in a pregnancy that had come late in life. The wisdom of that time, as of now, would be to rest as much as possible. In spite of the promises Zechariah says he has received, he and Elizabeth must have worried that this precious burden could still be lost.

Perhaps this is why Elizabeth is overjoyed when, at Mary's unexpected arrival, the child moves strongly within her body and reassures her that all is well. Perhaps too there is the joy of an older woman in the newfound ability to identify with someone much younger in mutual pregnancy. No wonder Luke allows us to hear Elizabeth's excited voice. The word "blessed" bursts from her lips again and again. She tells Mary how the very sound of her voice brings everything around them to life. She asks the excited and delighted question, "Why has this happened to me?" Even after six months of pregnancy she cannot believe it.

Catching Elizabeth's excitement, Mary begins to sing. Elizabeth's joy has moved Mary beyond the quiet—probably dazed—acceptance of her reply to the angel, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be . . ." Quiet acceptance has turned into ecstatic song. If we had been present in the small house, we might even have seen Mary dance, for since her inner universe is alive, the outer universe has come alive for her. Because God has done this within her, God has done much more around her in the world. Often when we experience great joy we project that joy to others, letting it spill over the world around us until the music within us becomes a universal symphony. Many of us have sung our own Magnificat without realizing that what we sing echoes Mary's song.

Most of us who read this will soon take our journey to a house where the promises of God come true and new life comes into the world, for so we can describe the church of which we are a member. We will set out within a few days to encounter Mary and her child. We will go as Elizabeth would have gone if she had paid a return visit when the child was born in Bethlehem, and brought her son John in her arms.

Within our own souls the child of faith has been born, and we go to sing the joy that comes from possessing Christian faith in a world of turmoil and transition. We know

that we do not deserve the gift of Christian faith. Like Elizabeth, we could ask in joyful disbelief, “Why has this happened to me?” But since we have indeed been given this priceless gift of faith, we can with the shepherds join with others around us in *Gloria in Excelsis* and, with Mary, sing out most joyfully.