

The wisdom of a kinswoman (Luke 1:39-55)

Mary's first move is to set off to visit Elizabeth.

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The gospel reading for Advent 4C picks up the story where Advent 4B left off a year ago. Which is to say: we are plunged into the middle of Luke's masterful weaving together of the origin/birth narratives of Jesus and his cousin John.

We don't actually get the story of the annunciation in the lectionary this year, but those of us who've heard this one a few times know where we stand: Mary has just received a surprise visit from the angel Gabriel, who told her the perplexing news that she, in her virgin body, would conceive and bear a son destined for the throne of David. And—almost as if an afterthought!—Gabriel added that Mary's elderly, heretofore barren kinswoman Elizabeth is also with child.

Mary's first move is to set off to visit Elizabeth. And thus Luke sets up the poetic encounter between these dueling unlikely pregnancies: one scandalously too old to be pregnant, the other scandalously too unmarried. One who views her pregnancy as God "taking away the disgrace" of her childlessness (Lk. 1:25), the other perhaps fearing the disgrace hers would bring (see Matt. 1:19). One just emerging from five months of seclusion (Lk. 1:24), the other just starting her own few months of it (1:56). One having been drenched by the Holy Spirit from the day of conception (1:35), the other just now getting her own fill of it (1:41).

There's a lot about Mary's situation that I cannot identify with. There's also one detail I can: the impulse to receive challenging news and take it straight to an elder kinswoman. I am the youngest of a slew of sisters, and I have been blessed countless times over the years by their abilities to see something I'm struggling with in a different light. Now that we're all a bit older (and living very different lives from each other), I know I am able to offer each of them the same at times.

And so I wonder what unique things Mary and Elizabeth are able to offer each other, right from the moment they embrace in Zechariah's courtyard and fetal John the Baptist leaps for joy. How is each woman able to be grace and peace to the other, simply by showing such a different—but trusted—perspective on a shared and bewildering experience?

I imagine there are a lot of feelings stirring in Mary as she heads to the hill country and ponders what is happening in her body: new life and God's glory, alongside the nausea, fear, and exhaustion. But the first word Elizabeth greets her with is "Blessed!"—and I wonder if it's only because of this greeting that Mary is able, when she finally speaks, to lead with the beautiful Magnificat. Despite all the unknowns, Mary knows it is going to be alright, in part because her trusted kinswoman tells her so—with her words and by her very presence alongside her (complete with leaping womb). And Elizabeth suddenly knows that things will be OK for her as well, even though she and her husband have not been able to exchange a word since before her strange pregnancy began (1:20).

This is the gift of close relationship at its best: giving and receiving the reassurance we need, even when we can't quite see it for ourselves.