

## Visitation of the Spirit

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In those days Mary went to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth, and when the two women greeted each other, some very remarkable things began to happen. Our Gospel story this morning is a story of the Holy Spirit breaking in where least expected, transforming a situation of awkwardness and fear, creating possibilities of new life and hope.

But if we are to understand this transforming work of the Spirit breaking in, we have to know what the Spirit is breaking in *to*, we have to know how Elizabeth and Mary came to be in their situations, and why it is they are greeting each other now.

So here's the story so far: Elizabeth, according to Luke's story, is a woman with no children. She and her husband Zechariah are good and faithful people; but Elizabeth is barren, and they've never had a family, and now it looks like they never will have a family, because they are both "getting on in years," as Luke so delicately puts it. And being without children puts Elizabeth in a very precarious position in her society. Children were considered a blessing from God; but *absence* of children was considered a shame, a failure, maybe even a curse from God. To have no children shamed Elizabeth in her neighbors' eyes. And there were practical consequences, too: women in that society had virtually no legal standing of their own; they were always some man's daughter, or some man's wife, or some man's mother (or mother-in-law). But since Elizabeth had no son to be mother to, her position in the community depended entirely on Zechariah; and if anything should happen to him, she'd have no money, no home, no one to turn to. For Elizabeth, being childless means living a life that is always on the verge of having no future, no hope, no possibilities. Having no children is hard for Zechariah, but for Elizabeth it is much, much worse.

Now Zechariah was a member of a priestly family, and that meant that once a year he had to go to Jerusalem and spend a month serving in the rituals of the Temple. One day Zechariah was burning incense in the Temple, when the archangel Gabriel appeared before him. And Gabriel said, "You and Elizabeth will conceive a son; and you will call him John; and he will turn the hearts of the people back to their God; and he will baptize to prepare the way for the Messiah." And Zechariah said, "I don't think so. Elizabeth and I are both old; we're past having children. This message couldn't be for us—you must be looking for someone else." And Gabriel said, "No, the message is for you, and you and Elizabeth will have a son, whether you believe it or not. But because you have not believed what God can do, you will not be able to speak until your son is born." And the angel disappeared.

So Zechariah went home, and when he was reunited with Elizabeth, Elizabeth did conceive—and the couple that was too old to have children was suddenly expecting their firstborn. And Elizabeth was overjoyed.

When Elizabeth was about six months pregnant, Gabriel went to Nazareth in Galilee and told Mary that she, also, was going to have a son. Most of us know *that* story, and we know how Mary had the faith and trust to say, "Let it be with me according to your word." But we don't often stop and think about what a big risk Mary was taking. She was engaged, but she was not yet married; and if it were to be discovered that she was pregnant, most of the people around her will *assume* she is guilty of adultery—maybe even Joseph will assume she's guilty of adultery and call off the wedding. Mary knows that if she stays in Nazareth, people will gossip and misunderstand and accuse. Mary knows she needs the wisdom and guidance of an older woman who can understand what she's going through, a woman who has some experience of an unexpected, miraculous pregnancy—so Mary packs up and heads off to the hill country to learn what she can from her kinswoman Elizabeth.

So Mary comes to Elizabeth and Zechariah's house; and Mary greets Elizabeth; and as soon as Elizabeth hears that greeting, the child in her womb leaps for joy. The unborn John the Baptist leaps—and as he does, Elizabeth herself is filled with the Holy Spirit, and Elizabeth looks, and Elizabeth sees in Mary what no one else has yet seen: Elizabeth sees that Mary is pregnant—and more than this, Elizabeth sees that Mary's baby is blessed, that Mary's baby is her Lord—and more than *this*, Elizabeth sees that Mary has the faith to believe that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord. All of this sudden insight, all this ability to see in Mary what no one else has yet been able to see, is the gift of the Holy Spirit to Elizabeth in one remarkable moment of inspiration.

And when Mary hears Elizabeth speak, Mary receives her own remarkable inspiration. By the power of the Spirit, Mary says “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my savior.” All of Mary's fear melts away; all her anxiety about social judgment reverses, and instead she has a vision of the reversal of society: “God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” All of Mary's fear turns suddenly into blessing: “All generations will call me blessed,” she sings, “for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” Mary sings a song of triumph even before her child is born, because in Elizabeth's faith Mary has found the validation of her own faith; in Elizabeth's courage Mary has found encouragement for her own courage; in Elizabeth's embrace of the new possibilities opened up for her by God, Mary has found her own way to embrace the new possibility of what God is doing in her.

In a remarkable moment the Holy Spirit breaks through and inspires these two women to see and know and engage the new thing God is doing. By the power of the Spirit, Mary and Elizabeth know each other in a whole new way, in a new relationship grounded in the love of Christ within. By the power of the Spirit, Mary and Elizabeth see in each other the promise of Christ that no one else has seen. By the power of the Spirit, Mary and Elizabeth are empowered to be the agents of God's purpose for the renewing of the world in Christ.

And of course the point of the story is that the Holy Spirit does that for us, too. The Holy Spirit breaks into our lives in remarkable moments, and inspires and empowers us for transformation in the mission of Christ, too.

The Holy Spirit empowers us so that we can bear witness to the new possibilities that God brings to birth in us, even when everything else seems to have grown old and used up and barren and hopeless. The Holy Spirit empowers us so that we can receive the grace to see in others the truth of God's blessing in them, perhaps before they see it themselves. The Holy Spirit empowers us so that we can speak the blessings we see, and proclaim the goodness of God's promise. As with Elizabeth and Mary in the story, the Holy Spirit breaks through in us, so that we can be key players in the tale of how Christ comes to be present in our world, too.

And so, on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, I invite you to let the Holy Spirit inspire and empower *you*. Take a moment to think of one new thing, one new possibility that God has brought to birth in you that you never would have guessed at Christmas-time a year ago. Take a moment to really *look* at someone you know, and see the truth of God's promise and blessing in them, maybe something nobody else has seen. Take a moment to *tell* someone the blessing you see in them, and encourage them to live that blessing to its full. I invite you to *be* a part of the story of how Christ comes to be present with us—and so celebrate this Advent, and this Christmas, and this Life in Christ, for now and for ever. Amen.