

The Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year C (RCL)

Mother of God

Micah 5:2-5a; Canticle 3; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55

It's been a good visit. Going to see my cousin Elizabeth has always meant the best of times for me. She's much older, of course, older than my mother, but she's always understood me. All my life, even when my parents thought I was difficult or odd, Elizabeth could *hear* me—somehow she could listen and not judge. I always knew she loved me, and I could really talk to her. It was like I was the daughter she never had: she always wanted children so badly.

And now she has a child—a son! John, they've called him. His birth should have been impossible—it's a miracle, truly, that he was born at all. I'm so glad I was there to be with her, to help and to learn . . . because it's my turn next. Just yesterday I felt the tiniest flutter, like a butterfly deep inside me—I suppose it's proof that what the angel told me was really true. Another miracle, another impossible birth. Only a little while now, and I will have a son of my own.

The angel. What a strange day that was! I was doing my usual chores, helping my mother with the house and the younger children. Everyone else was in another part of the house, and I was alone for a moment, when I suddenly knew I was *not* alone. No door had opened; there was no sound. But the hair on my arms stood up, and I could hardly breathe. And then I heard his Voice—was it with my ears, or was it only inside my head? I don't know, but the words were clear: "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."¹

I probably should have fainted from fear—with the words came a light and a presence that filled the room—but I was so startled by the words themselves that all I could do was sit absolutely still. What did he mean, "favored one?"—I'm just an ordinary girl, in my fifteenth summer. I *am* blessed to be engaged to a good man named Joseph; my parents have made all the arrangements with the matchmaker. But this seemed like something more that the Voice was talking about—not just ordinary good fortune, but a blessing from the God of my ancestors.

The light swirled in the room, and I could almost see a shining person; it was hard to look at him for long. His Voice came again, gently, "Do not be afraid, Mary," he said, "for you have found favor with God." I began to breathe again, as my fear melted away and left only wonder. What had *I* ever done that God would be pleased with me? I could not imagine why I should be set apart like this.

The angel's Voice went on, and as he spoke his Voice became stronger, like a trumpet announcing the coming of a king. "And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great . . . called the Son of the Most High . . . the throne of his ancestor David." There was more—my son would rule forever, his kingdom without end—but somehow I couldn't get past that first part.

I took a breath and whispered, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (I'm young, yes, but I understand something of the ways of a man with a maid!) What the Voice was saying seemed impossible: Joseph and I are engaged, but we are not yet married, and he is an honorable man. No child could be conceived in me until our

¹ Luke 1:28

marriage took place . . . or so I thought. For the angel answered me with words so deep and strong that I could hardly understand them: God's Holy Spirit would come upon me, he said. I would be overshadowed by the power of God Most High, and the child I would bear would be holy; he would be God's own Son.

The angel told me of Elizabeth, of how she would soon bear a son herself, even though she is old and was barren all her life. "Nothing will be impossible with God," he concluded, and his Voice was like horns and bells proclaiming the power and the possibilities. And then he was silent; he waited for me to answer.

My mind reeled. A son, the holy Child of God. *My son!* Never in all the stories of my faith had I heard of any woman (and I am hardly yet a woman—only a girl, really) being told that she would bear the Son of God. I still didn't understand. . . . Light and shadow swirled around me, as I felt the love of God, the graciousness of God who—it suddenly dawned on me—was not *demanding* this of me, but asking my permission! I, Mary of Nazareth, daughter of the people of Israel, chosen to carry into the world a Child who would fulfill all God's promises and change the world forever! Chosen—but the choice was mine.

My reason could not answer sensibly; it was my faith that spoke to the waiting light: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." I did not need to know how; I only knew that what my God spoke was true.

Suddenly the angel was gone, and the room returned to normal. I heard my brothers and sisters chattering in the next room, smelled my mother's cooking, felt the sun's warmth through the open window before me. But inside, I knew I was changed. I tried to tell my parents what had happened, but they only looked worried. A few days later, my father told me to pack some things and make ready to go south to the hill country of Judea for a visit with our cousins. He would talk to Joseph, he said, and when I returned in a few weeks, perhaps three months, we would see about the wedding.

The journey seemed long, and I was glad to see Zechariah's house—even more glad to see my dear cousin Elizabeth. We had so much to talk about that no one else could understand! Just as the angel had said, old as she was, she was clearly heavy with child, a month or two away from giving birth to her impossible baby.

I called her name and started across the room to embrace her, when she suddenly looked at me very strangely, clasped her hands over her belly, and cried out in a loud voice: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" I stopped in my tracks as she came to me and reached to touch my own stomach. We stood there together, cradling our unborn sons in the center of our being, embracing them and each other with gentle hands and shining eyes.

I had never seen a prophet, but I knew in that moment that Elizabeth was a prophet of Israel as surely as Samuel or Isaiah, and her words told me that her child, too, was a prophet even before his birth. Without my even telling her my news, she spoke with the knowledge that God had given her, "Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" she cried, hugging me tightly. "For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." She knew. She knew me. She knew my unspoken fears and the depth of my faith. She knew my child before any eye but God's could see him.

I couldn't speak. I'd hardly spoken at all since I saw the angel in my room, and then only in a whisper. Ordinary speech, the talk of markets and supper tables, was not for me in those days, for my life—the life of all the world—had taken on a new depth and brilliance I had never known before. I could whisper, quiet so as not to disturb the newborn sense of God's presence with me and within me. And I could sing, for singing takes the words of my deep heart's core and gives them wings to fly to the heart of God who loves me. "Blessed is she who believes," said my beloved Elizabeth, and her prophet's eyes shone with the Spirit of God that filled her. And I sang:

"My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior.
 For he hath regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden.
 For behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
 For he that is mighty hath magnified me, and holy is his Name.
 And his mercy is on them that fear him throughout all generations.
 He hath showed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the
 imagination of their hearts.
 He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and
 meek.
 He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he hath sent empty away.
 He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel, as he promised to our
 forefathers, Abraham and his seed for ever."²

I sang the song of my people, God's people, in thanksgiving for God's promises, made so long ago and now fulfilled in my life. I sang the song of my soul, in praise of God who has chosen me to bring the Love of God into the world in Human flesh. I sang the song of the Glorious Impossible, of the power of God to turn the world right side up, to cleanse and heal all that sinful human beings have dirtied and destroyed.

I sang your song, for the Child who is to be born is not only my child. Be still, and look within yourself. I have felt the tiny butterfly-flutter of new life within me, begun there by the gracious word and action of God, begun when I believed and said "yes" to my Lord. But I am not the only Mother of God.

Do you believe? Can you say "yes"? Will you feel new life grow within you, and bring God's own Child *soon* into the world? It's nearly time.

Mollie Douglas Turner+
 Bruton Parish Episcopal Church, Williamsburg, Virginia
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² Canticle 3, *Magnificat*: The Song of Mary, in *The Book of Common Prayer*, page 65; and S 185 in *The Hymnal 1982*.