

Year C, Advent 4

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Luke 1:39-45 (Common English Bible, copyright, 2011)

Mary visits Elizabeth

³⁹ Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. ⁴⁰ She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. ⁴³ Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. ⁴⁵ Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

Surprised by Joy

On Tuesday, Laura, my wife, called from her church saying "you will never guess what just happened! A most incredible thing! I can't believe it! A Bolivian woman a little younger than me whom I remember from Sunday School in La Paz has just called me. We talked to each other across two continents and she showed me the inside of the favorite church of my childhood. I never thought this would happen!" It was a person Laura had not seen for at least 50 years. They toured the church using Facetime. The woman had recently been in the states visiting her children and grandchildren and had obtained Laura's phone number while here. Now she was calling from Bolivia.

She was calling that day because she wanted to connect Laura with the people who still attended the church from 50 years ago who remember Laura or her parents (Laura's mother died this year and her father died two years ago). These people in La Paz were now very old and in the church building that day because this was the day they were giving out food to their elderly members—their form of love baskets. As she spoke Betty, an Aymara Indian woman, panned her Facetime camera around and Laura saw bowls filled with flour, rice, sugar, pasta and fruit to be put into plastic bags and given to each elderly person who came to receive it.

Laura could hardly contain her joy. She was seeing the church of her childhood, the church in the midst of the Black Market in La Paz, and it had changed very little. Then her tour guide began taking Laura to the people she might remember and to Laura's astonishment she recognized several of them.

Laura's spirit leaped with joy at the connection. She was in touch with the people and place so important to her history and so filled with the Holy Spirit—that spirit that levels differences in class, culture and race and causes all to feel God's universal love.

As people saw Laura's face on the tiny screen and remembered her, each exclaimed in Spanish "The Lord Bless You!" It was a moment filled with joy and promise; a tiny taste of God's coming kingdom in its fullness.

It was a little like when Mary and Elizabeth met in the Judean Hills, each with child and both filled with the Holy Spirit. Mary had hurried there needing Elizabeth's comfort and confirmation; the older woman blessing the younger. And Elizabeth, without a trace of rivalry, gave her the blessing she needed.

Upon hearing Mary's voice the child in Elizabeth's womb leaped and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit blurts out in a loud voice, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry." What a blessing for Mary! Then Elizabeth asks, "Why do I have this honor; that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Her humility reminds me of the strong Indian women of Laura's youth.

At the meeting in Zechariah's house each woman carries the mystery of God's love for all humanity in their bodies. Mary's body carries God's Son. And so, beginning with Elizabeth's question, this humble, poor, woman-child becomes "Theotokos," the ancient Greek name for "The Mother of God."

Elizabeth carries the pre-natal John the Baptist who opens the way for God's Son. In Luke's story, John the Baptist, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, knows he is the forerunner of God's Messiah even before he is born and leaps for Joy three months prior to his birth when in Messiah's presence.

There is a sense in which the pregnant Mary is like the true church. Like the true church, Christ is hidden in her body, active and growing within. Like the church, Mary has received God into herself and allowed herself to be a vehicle of blessing to all human-kind.

Just as Mary took in God, we take in God today in receiving Communion. In eating the bread and drinking the wine we take into our bodies the very presence of the Holy. We become inhabited by the Eternal One; overwhelmed by his body broken for us, and profoundly nurtured by his blood of forgiveness poured out that we might drink it and live. In receiving communion we become inhabited by Pure Love.

How blessed are we! We have been blessed beyond our wildest imagination. Our spirits leap with joy. We are discovering that the Lord has fulfilled his promises and new life does stretch out before us endlessly. Thanks be to God! Amen!