

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Since we’re soon to celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus, it is nice this morning to have a Gospel text focused on his mother, Mary. We’re ready! We’re ready for this, aren’t we?

And Mary, as we read of her today, is in a hurry to visit her relative, Elizabeth. These two women are already close and both are pregnant, so perhaps this common bond of experience between them means they’re even closer.

When Mary arrives at Elizabeth’s house, the two together are free to fully express what their bodies already communicate – that God is birthing a holy promise – and great hope for the world – from blessed Mary’s womb.

Perhaps in the past you’ve heard some sermons that you thought were theological and impersonal, but the intimacy and the personal nature of this text seem counter to any abstract analysis.

This is two women talking together, deeply sharing – “womb business,” if you will. Men, perhaps, cannot understand, but women who have been pregnant – they know. They know!

The soul friendship of pregnancy, and a very dramatic and important secret shared and, finally, a woman’s heartfelt song of faith like nothing ever sung before or since – *magnificat*, holy Mary’s simple yet ever-so-elegant song of praise.

This is Mary and Elizabeth knowing that they have entered a marvelous work of great mystery and great sanctity. And thanks to the Gospel-writer, Luke, this is also us knowing that we, too, in welcoming the Christ, enter into that same mystery and sanctity!

By welcoming Jesus into our hearts, into our lives, into our homes, we, too, like Mary become partners with God in a brand new way – and we, too, can sing a song of faith that we have never sung before – or sing it again with renewed vitality and fervor.

Whether or not we are surprised that Elizabeth discerns and declares God’s special blessing on Mary as her own child leaps in her womb, Luke is telling us that we should feel a connection to the story of these two women coming together and what passed between them.

This visit is set within a long and great tradition of women sharing the joys and the struggles of their pregnancies with each other. And perhaps at some level we sense that the possibility of some extraordinary act of God in human birth is not so far-fetched.

And, no, we don't have to be women before we can discern that God is here fulfilling the ancient and eternal promise of salvation. This story is for everyone: woman and man, old and young, skeptic and believer. No one is excluded; in fact, everyone is included.

But the heart of this incredible meeting and story is not that its main characters were the only ones to have met some specific criteria by which God chose only them. No, in fact, the heart of this story is exactly the opposite.

Unlikely people in every respect receive the capacity to both birth and discern God's fulfillment of the ancient and eternal promise. Unlikely people – and if that is the heart of this story, then it is also the gift of it.

You don't need to be Mary; you don't even need to be young or pregnant or even a woman to share in the miracle of what God is doing! But God does use the language and images of birth to speak of the way that grace enters our lives through Christ.

The Scriptures teach that in baptism we are reborn in Christ. And faith, we say, is "birthed" within us – its seed is planted within, fertilized by the Holy Spirit, and, hopefully, grows to maturity.

We then deliver this faith to the world by sharing the Gospel and speaking the words of God's good news; by doing acts of compassion and justice, by doing acts of mercy and love.

The truth is, we are all unlikely persons for God to visit with the grace of the Gospel – but here God is again, knocking at our door!

The only real criteria I can see operating in this story is that these two young women were open to God's call and open to God's plan. They had no power, no status, no wealth. But they were open to the possibilities of faith – and God used them mightily for great purpose.

The two things that impress me about Mary's song of praise are her humility and her ability to truly honor and adore God. I have always felt that her reference to her lowliness and her heartfelt praise were both authentic and genuine.

But I want to ask you to think for a moment and consider: What song would you have sung? What song do you sing now knowing that God has entrusted you with God's greatest treasure (for Christ does indeed come for everyone)?

Maybe it's difficult for you to imagine your song. But can you see what makes you an unlikely partner for God as God sends grace and love into our lives and our world?

Maybe you have some power, or status, or wealth – or all three – or none of the above. Maybe your faith isn't quite as rock-solid strong as you would like.

Maybe your grasp of God's promises is tenuous. Perhaps we should think again of Mary and Elizabeth – they remind us that being open to the possibilities of faith has far more power to include us in the story than all the details that might exclude us.

We can't keep God at arm's length and expect to be at God's side in the story. We can't put conditions on God's communication with us and expect to hear everything God says.

And surely we can't pre-judge other people and expect to understand how God is moving in their lives. Being open to the possibilities of faith means placing ourselves in God's presence and among God's people.

Being open to the possibilities of faith means cultivating an attitude of listening through God's Word, through God's people, and in God's world.

Where am I not open at all? Where am I not open enough? Mary and Elizabeth were simply open – they didn't even bother to dwell on what was likely, or unlikely. Instead, they chose to live openly with God – and what blessing and grace it brought them!

When we celebrate this story each year, we should do so in the hope that we will find our place in it.

Our goal should be to find that this story is not about “remember when” but “still today.” “Still today” God finds unlikely people, people like you and me, people who are open.

And “still today” God plants in them the seed of promise, the seed of hope, the seed of eternal life. “Still today” God fulfills the promise in unlikely people. Pause in these final days of Advent expectancy, and be open. Be open, and the grace of God will come! Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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