

## Big Questions, Big Answers Pt 4

4 Advent C

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### First Reading: Micah 5:2-5a

*The prophet Micah, having pronounced judgment upon Judah, speaks of a future shepherd-king who, like David, will come from the small town of Bethlehem. (Ephrathah refers to the area around Bethlehem.) This king will restore Israel & bring peace.*

<sup>2</sup>But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. <sup>3</sup>Therefore they shall be given up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of the ruler's kindred shall return to the people of Israel. <sup>4</sup>& the ruler shall stand & feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God & they shall live secure, for now the ruler shall be great to the ends of the earth; & he shall be the one of peace.

### Gospel: Luke 1:39-45 [46-55]

*Elizabeth, John's mother, & Mary, the mother of Jesus, are two women filled with the Holy Spirit & with faith. In Elizabeth's inspired greeting & Mary's song of praise we hear of a saving God who remembers, scatters, lifts up, & fulfills all things.*

<sup>39</sup>In those days Mary set out & went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup>where she entered the house of Zechariah & greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. & Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup>& exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, & blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup>& why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup>For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup>& blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." <sup>46</sup>& Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup>& my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup>who has looked with favor on me, a lowly servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me: holy is the name of the Lord, <sup>50</sup>whose mercy is for the God-fearing from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup>The arm of the Lord is filled with strength, scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup>God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, & lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup>God has filled the hungry with good things, & sent the rich away empty. <sup>54</sup>God has helped Israel, the Lord's servant,

in remembrance of mercy, <sup>55</sup>according to the promise God made to our ancestors, to Abraham & to his descendants forever.”

## **Being Recognized, Encountering Christ**

Often called the visitation, the encounter between Mary & Elizabeth is full of joy, recognition, gratitude, & blessing. Luke immediately follows the annunciation with Mary’s journey to visit Elizabeth, who gives this unmarried pregnant girl not only a safe haven but also the first glimpse of what it means to be the mother of the Savior. The encounter is full of mystery & grace: the mystery of new life forming but still invisible, & the grace of recognizing each other as the Spirit-filled mothers they are becoming. The story is also full of theological gravity: as the women encounter each other, so do Jesus & John the Baptist. Yet the theological meaning is almost overshadowed by the sheer physicality of the encounter. Imagine the hasty travel, demonstrative greeting, joyful exclamation, the unborn John leaping for joy, & robust singing. As the celebration of Christ’s birth approaches, the four active & responsive bodies in this text remind us that this is, after all, the incarnation itself unfolding. God becomes a body in Jesus, & that body will be offered up for the sake of the world. This body, recognized already by John in the womb, will eventually undergo the suffering & shame of death on a cross. Without losing sight of that big picture, today we enter into the up-close picture of Mary & Elizabeth’s encounter & share in the joy & gratitude they have in common with all who recognize Christ in their neighbor.

## **Theological Reflection**

*Why* is Mary called “blessed”? Is it because she is famous, remembered, important, adored, prayed to? It’s easy to assume so when we read these words without thinking carefully about them, & apply our own human desires to her words. But Mary considered herself blessed not because she would be known as the mother of the Savior, but because she was able to serve God with her whole being.

## **Connections with Creation**

What does Mary do after the angel announces she will give birth to Jesus? She dashes off to visit Elizabeth. Like Mary, when we bear Christ within our very selves, we too feel an urge to connect with others. The burgeoning life within us draws us into community. We not only seek out trusted allies & friends—we also reach across barriers of class & race to build more robust communities. As the earth reels from species extinction, toxic waste, & climate emergency, God calls us out of isolation & into community. How do we deepen loving connection with our human neighbors & our other-than-human kin?

Maybe we learn the names of our neighbors & share tools, resources, skills, & expertise. Maybe we learn the names of local trees & birds, support farms & I& trusts, & join the fight to stop pipelines, incinerators, & dumps often sited in low-income neighborhoods.

## **4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent**

Throughout Advent we acclaim that God comes, in the past in the history of Israel & the incarnation of Jesus, in the present in the word & sacrament of each Sunday, & in the future at the end of all things. Only on this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday do the readings refer to the story of Jesus' birth as an arrival of God among us. At the thanksgiving at table, we join with Mary to praise God for salvation. This Sunday, we light all 4 candles of the Advent wreath, & we read the story from Luke about Mary visiting Elizabeth. Christians believe that in baptism we too are filled with the Holy Spirit so that Christ will dwell in us. Come to worship: the mystery approaches.

## **Luke**

3 gospels in the New Testament offer similar portraits of the life of Jesus; Luke is the 3<sup>rd</sup> of them. Its author, traditionally Luke the physician who accompanied Paul on some of his missionary journeys, draws on 3 sources: Mark (via Matthew), a collection of sayings (known as Q for *Quelle*, German for *source*) & his own source. It is a gospel that emphasizes God's love for the poor, the disadvantaged, minorities, outcasts, sinners & lepers. Women play a more prominent part than in the other gospels. Luke never uses Semitic words; this is one argument for thinking that he wrote primarily for Gentiles. The 3<sup>rd</sup> gospel, written probably in the late 80s ce for a Gentile audience, proclaims God's forgiveness & salvation available to the entire world through the Jewish Jesus. Tradition says that the gospel was written by Luke, an associate of Paul, although the author's introduction states that he is a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation believer who researched the story of Jesus. Jesus' infancy narratives were probably developed decades after the death of Jesus to give fuller understanding of his person & ministry. In terms of the story, were Mary's condition discovered, she would be a candidate for stoning, so some interpreters suggest that in visiting her kinswoman, she is escaping detection. As we expect from Luke, Elizabeth too is filled with the Holy Spirit, & Mary models faith in God's word. To be blessed is to be brought into a circle in which the people are praising God & God is gracing the people. Mary's song, read or sung, is similar to the canticle of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1-10) & is a compact example of Hebrew psalmody, in which God is praised for past, present, & future salvation of the poor & lowly.

## [Luke 1:39-45 \[46-55\]](#)

Mary, Elizabeth, & all the baptized have been filled with the Holy Spirit. God's promise comes especially to the downtrodden, the hungry, the lowly. We are thus called to stand with these people, as Elizabeth did, & be surprised to discover in them the presence of God. Mary is visiting Elizabeth & Zechariah. God's messenger, Gabriel, has told her that she will bear Jesus, "the Son of God" (v. [35](#)), successor to David & founder of an eternal kingdom. With God, "nothing will be impossible" (v. [37](#)) – it was possible for Sarah to bear a child. Mary now thanks God in a poem known as the *Magnificat*, the first word of its Latin translation. Speaking today, she might begin: *From the depth of my heart, I declare the Lord's greatness & rejoice in God my Savior.* "Servant" (v. [48](#)) can also be rendered *slave* or *handmaid*: in v. [38](#), she has acknowledged that she is a "servant of the Lord", i.e. obedient to him in all things. She will be hailed by people of every age ("generations", v. [48](#)) in the new era of salvation launched by her son. Why? Because of the seemingly impossible "things" (v. [49](#)) God has done for her. Then a reminder (v. [50](#)): God is compassionate to all who hold him in awe throughout time. vv. [51-53](#) universalize her experience, to reflect how God deals with all humanity. While the verbs are in the past tense in English, the Greek tense has the sense of: how God customarily acts – as he always has & will continue to do – & what he is starting to do in the conception of Jesus. The "proud" (v. [51](#)), the arrogant, are alienated from God by their very "thoughts"; he reverses fortunes, raising up those in need ("lowly", v. [52](#), "hungry", v. [53](#)) & rejecting the rich, those who think they don't need God. Vv. [54-55](#) sum up the *Magnificat*: in his compassion, God has fulfilled & continues to fulfill his promises to the patriarchs.

## [Micah 5:2-5a](#)

The book of Micah represents the oracles spoken in the eighth century bce in the southern kingdom of Judah by a prophet who condemned the people for their unfaithfulness to the covenant & warned them of the political disaster which God might send as punishment. After the conquest of Canaan, the clan of Ephrathah settled Bethlehem, five miles south of Jerusalem. The passage includes several important biblical themes: God honoring the lowliest; the messiah as descendent from David of Bethlehem; the king as a good shepherd; the worldwide rule of God's coming one; & eventually the gift of peace. The passage from Micah is set next to the Advent story of the visitation because of its references to a pregnant woman, to Bethlehem, & to the

coming one who will rule “to the ends of the earth.” Christians see this hope of Micah fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Micah wrote at a time when the Assyrian army had invaded the northern kingdom, Israel, & when corruption was rife in Judah. The rich cheated & robbed the poor; priests & prophets adapted their words to suit their audiences. In 701 BC, Jerusalem was besieged & Judah became a vassal state of Assyria. The invaders occupied part of the coastal plain, menacing Micah’s home city, Moresheth, & the surrounding area. The prophet speaks “the word of the Lord that came” ([1:1](#)) to him: in [4:9-5:1](#), he tells of the humiliation & difficulties Israel must experience in the near future. Despite “many nations [being] ... assembled against you” ([4:11](#)), God will give the Israelites victory over their enemies: this is God’s plan. But a time will come when a ruler will arise from the Ephrathah clan of the tribe of Judah (Ephrathah being the area round Bethlehem); he will “rule in Israel” (v. [2](#)) & will be of ancient lineage (“from of old ...”). (David being from Bethlehem, people understood the lineage to be his; as Matthew [2:5-6](#) shows, at the time of Jesus, they understood this figure to be the Messiah, the ideal future king, who would bring misery to an end & usher in God’s glorious kingdom.) God will “give them up” (v. [3](#), allow his people to be oppressed) until the right time. The woman in v. [3](#) is this king’s mother. When he is born, oppression will end & all Israelites will be reunited. He will be like a shepherd, feeding his people (“flock”, v. [4](#)) through the power & authority of God. He will bring an era of peace. He will rule in Jerusalem (v. [7](#)).

## Images in the Readings

The **pregnant woman** can be a symbol of the life that comes from God. In the Bible, many women, from Eve in Genesis 4:1 on, conceive & bear children with the help of God. Here both the virgin Mary & the post-menopausal Elizabeth are pregnant. When we acclaim God as creator, we attest that God is continually creating life on this earth. What has been termed “the Visitation” is observed also on May 31. Recently many women have found inspiration in this story of **two women**, each in some way outside the mainstream, supporting one another. The **arm of the Lord** is a repeated image in the Old Testament. Biblical imagery describes God’s activities as if God had a human-like body, although with scarce reference to male or female generative organs. By the fifth century, theologians, quite aware of polytheisms in which the deities have bodies, opposed any literal belief in God as a superhuman. Singing Mary’s Magnificat in Advent, we think of the infant’s arms as the almighty power of God.

## Life on the Earth

In some religions & spiritualities, the divine is so far away from the human that things of the earth are rejected for contemplation of things that are not of the earth. However, in

Christianity, the incarnation proclaims the opposite: that God entered a woman's womb & was born on earth for earth. Christians can think of the celebration of the incarnation as the truest Earth Day.

### **Comments from the Cloud of Witnesses**

Our Lord God showed me our Lady, Saint Mary. The greatness & nobility she saw in God filled her full of reverent dread, & with it she saw herself so little, so low, so simple, so poor in comparison to her Lord God that her reverent dread filled her full of meekness. & thus she was filled full of grace & of all manner of virtues. & thus it is between our Lord Jesus & us the greatest joy possible that he who is highest & mightiest, noblest & worthiest, becomes lowest & meekest, friendliest & most courteous. & our Lord wills that we believe, choose & trust him, enjoy & delight in him, comforting & solacing ourselves as best we can with his grace & his help until the time we see it in reality. The marvelous courtesy & unassuming friendliness no one may experience in this present life unless doing so through the great fullness of grace given inwardly by the Holy Spirit. —*Julian of Norwich*.... **Julian of Norwich** (1342-c.1416) is known to us almost only through her book, *The Revelations of Divine Love*, which is widely acknowledged as one of the great classics of the spiritual life. She wrote the best-known surviving book in the English language written by a mystic, *Revelations of Divine Love*, which is also the earliest surviving book in English known to be written by a woman. [Julian of Norwich was not a nun, nor did she have a lifetime calling into her religious vocation. It is believed that she was a widow who had lost both a husband & child to the Black Plague.](#) *Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love*, ed. M. L. de Mastro (Garden City, NY: Image, 1977), 92, 94.

*(Thanks to [sundaysandseasons.com](http://sundaysandseasons.com); [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org); [montreal.anglican.org](http://montreal.anglican.org))*