

Advent 4
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We are pressed up against the eve of the eve of Christmas. As we watch and wait, our eyes turn toward a peasant woman in an unimportant village on the far side of Palestine in a nation of people that have barely clung to existence for much of their history. This story should have disappeared into the folds of history. And yet, here we are with the rest of the world, straining eyes and hearts toward the little town of Bethlehem. Even the unbelievers join in song and celebration.

The world lights up with songs and trees and foods and fun to rehearse an ancient story that seem so unlikely and yet so filled with hope. In today's Gospel, we jump into the story several months before the big night in Bethlehem. We hear a minor exchange between a barren woman and a virgin who are both on the verge of giving birth. And the world will shake and fall because of the coming births.

When the Lord introduces a new era, he often brings it about through barren women. Sarah is barren and gives birth to the laughter that carries the promise that still echoes in today's story. Hannah is barren and gives birth the prophet whose words will never fall to the ground but go forth and bear fruit. In their barrenness, they become living signs of the barren age in which they live. When they conceive and bear children, it is an image of God bring new life into the deadness of the culture and the people.

Now today we meet Elizabeth, a barren woman, and Mary, a virgin. These two women are living signs that God has not forgotten his people and has not abandoned them in their low estate.

Everything that can shake is going to shake.

Even Elizabeth's womb. John jumps for joy within Elizabeth's womb when she stands before Mary. This joy ripples out through a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" (Lk 1:42)

Mary responds in song. Her psalm could be considered the first Psalm of the church. And her song has been song by the people of God ever since.

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant." (Lk 1:46-48)

Her song begins from the place of her lowly, humble estate. She has no special standing in the world and yet the High and Mighty draws near to her. In her opening words, I hear an echo of Isaiah,

For thus says the One who is high and lifted up,
who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
 “I dwell in the high and holy place,
and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,
 to revive the spirit of the lowly,
and to revive the heart of the contrite. (Is 57:15)

The high and mighty draws near to the low and powerless and speaks the Word of blessing, the Word of promise. At His Word, the Virgin will bear His son, the barren woman will have a child (Psalm 113:9), and the desolate one (Psalm 68:6) will be given a home. He raises up families that bless families, promising to Abraham that he will bless all families through His offspring.

By His Word, the Virgin will bear the Son of God. This mystery of the Virgin bearing a son is not simply a sign of a new age, but the sign of a new creation, for in the fullness of time, all things will be united, healed, restored in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. (Eph 1:10)

Mary, the hidden and lowly Virgin, hears the word of Gabriel,

Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. (Lk 1:30–33)

Mary, the lowly one responds, Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” Lk 1:38.

Now in the presence of Elizabeth and of all the ages, Mary sings out,

My soul magnifies the Lord,
 ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
 ⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
 ⁴⁹ for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name. (Lk 1:46–49).

All generations will call her blessed. The ancient generations and the future generations for she carries the hope of humanity in her womb. And through her, God will give His Son, the Blessed One, to all of Israel and to all the world.

Mary’s song echoes outward from the grace of God poured out upon her to the blessing of God’s mercy extending to all Israel. Then Israel like Mary will bear this Gospel to all nations. Today

the people of God continue to bear this Word and will continue to bear this word across all the ages.

50 And his mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation. (Lk 1:50).

Even now as we hear the song of Mary, we hear to song of God's blessing to us, reaching us in our lowliness with hope, with promise of new beginning, with the gift of grace and love. As Mary's song continues, we hear the ancient longing for justice. Those nations that have oppressed, those wealthy rulers that have oppressed, those wicked foes who have crushed the weak and innocent will fall and kneel before her Son, declare that He is Lord of all.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
52 he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty. (Lk 1:51–53).

We are both the lowly in need of grace and the high and mighty in need of humiliation. We are in need of both being brought low before the holiness of God. Like Isaiah, we fall before the throne of God, recognizing our desperate need for mercy and grace.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his offspring forever." Lk 1:54–55.

We are also the hungry and lowly in need of true food and real clothes. The Lord who is high and mighty, lifts us up from our lowliness and sets us in a family, the family of His love, the kingdom of His promise. For we who were far off, have been brought near in Christ. We who were the wild branch have been grafted into the vine.

In his grace and by the power of Jesus Christ His Son whom we celebrate this Christmas season, we, the children of iniquity are made the children of God.

Mary's song, the Magnificat has become the song of the people of God from across the ages. Today in this most joyous, sacred celebration of the coming of the Son, let us celebrate with heart wide open to the song of His love, lifting us up in our desolation and lowliness and setting us into the family of His love.