

***“FIRST IMPRESSIONS”***    FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT -C-

Micah 5: 1-4    Psalm 84    Hebrews 10: 5-10    Luke 1: 39-45

*By: Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

I would like to focus on today's gospel, but before we do, let's back up for a moment to better appreciate the good news in the reading. The beginning of Luke's gospel brings us into the world of women. Compare that with: Matthew, whose story opens with the genealogy, tracing Jesus' lineage through Joseph; Mark, who begins with John the Baptist and John, who gives us the Prologue about the Word. Luke starts with the story of the aged couple, Zechariah, a priest, and Elizabeth, whom we are told was "sterile."

Elizabeth's story in the beginning of Luke has been overlooked, probably because of the dramatic silencing of Zechariah and the role John the Baptist plays as Jesus' precursor. At least we are told Elizabeth's name; many women in the bible are not even named. They are called mother, daughter, wife or woman, that is, they are identified in relation to a male character. (For example, we never learn the name of Peter's mother-in-law, though she was cured by Jesus. She is just called Peter's mother-in-law.) A biblical person's name tells something about her or him. Elizabeth's name means, "my God is the one by whom I swear," or, it could mean, "God is my fullness." Now wouldn't that make a good prayer from now till Christmas? Use the name of Elizabeth to express our prayerful hope that we be faithful to God alone; or that we experience God's fullness at Christmas.

There is biblical background that relates to women who can't have children. (At that time, it never would occur to them that the reason a couple was childless might be due to the man's infertility.) Bearing children was seen as women's main function, children were most prized as a blessing from God. Not having a child affected the status and security of a woman; blame and disdain were placed on her. Not being able to have children was sometimes even seen as a punishment on the woman for some sin committed. But Luke has already described both Elizabeth and Zechariah as just or righteous (1:6). This is remarkable since the bible rarely uses the adjective "righteous" or "just" to describe a woman. Nevertheless, though she had done nothing wrong before God, when she realized that she was pregnant Elizabeth thanked God for removing "my reproach among men" (1:25).

The visitation scene in today's gospel is a very unique story. Remember that Elizabeth's husband has been struck mute for doubting the angel's message about Elizabeth's pregnancy. She, unlike her husband, is quick to recognize God's gracious action on her behalf and goes into seclusion (1:24). Luke portrays Elizabeth as more responsive to God's unexpected intercession. She senses that God's intention is that a person should not have to carry the burden she has had to bear. She does not blame God for the humiliation she has had; indeed, she sees God as one who delivers people from all oppression. The God Elizabeth and Mary praise is the God who delights in liberating oppressed people. This is the God who brought the Israelites out of slavery from Egypt and again from Babylon. Mary proclaims this liberating God in her Magnificat (1:46-55), but this powerful and prophetic statement by Mary does not appear on any Sunday in the year, and only once during the week day liturgies--December 22<sup>nd</sup>. (One of the criticisms of the lectionary is its lack of significant accounts from both the Old and New Testaments about women.) Elizabeth professes what God has done for her and from her seclusion, her quiet reflective place; she is prepared for Mary when she comes. Elizabeth has heard the Word, takes it within and nurtures it.

Now we are ready for Mary's arrival. This is a unique narrative since the male voice, Zechariah, is silent, thus giving dramatic emphasis to the women's conversation. Where does the Holy Spirit show up in Luke's Gospel and Acts? Well, in this story the Spirit comes to two women in a domestic setting. In this seeming-insignificant place the women proclaim what God is doing in the world; and their pregnancies give bodily witness to God's merciful acts. Here is something we men, especially celibate men, lack in experience. This is a moment in the gospel we need to see through the eyes of women, especially those who have borne children. Perhaps we could contact our women friends who have had children and ask their input on what is happening between Mary and Elizabeth.

Pregnant women say they find comfort in being with one another, sharing hopes and fears, gaining practical information about pregnancy and their changing bodies. Both Elizabeth and Mary have much to share, both have experienced blessings---- both are surprised. Elizabeth expected to go to her grave without having children. Mary is young, but her pregnancy will pose problems for her, Joseph and her family. Neither woman planned these events to happen in this way. Elizabeth proclaims what is happening: the Spirit of God is present and acting on behalf of humanity. The Word of God is being "fulfilled." Three times Elizabeth announces the good news; God is doing a "blessed" thing for Mary and also for all

humanity. A time of fulfillment has begun.

These two women show a great partnership in their faith. They are not rivaling each other for the first position in any hierarchy of favorites or blessed. Rather, Elizabeth here and Mary immediately afterwards (1:46-55), both announce the good thing God has done in them. Their faith is what unites them in mutual encouragement and support. In Luke's Gospel there are wonderful examples of collaboration among women: Galilean women are among those who assist in Jesus' mission (8:1-3); women are at the tomb to embalm his body (25: 56) and they announce the resurrection to the disciples (22:24).

Since Elizabeth is an older woman, the preacher has an opportunity to acknowledge the older women in the congregation and the world. The elderly are often cast as frail, needy and with diminished mental acuity. But Elizabeth is not like that; nor are the older women who form the backbone of most parishes. They serve in the sanctuary and work in parish offices; visit the sick and train the young. They pass on their wisdom to the next generation, as Elizabeth is doing in this story. Older women care for children when parents are at work or absent; they listen with compassion to the stories of the needy, humiliated and wounded. Women "of an age," like grandmothers, often are the ones who greet us with a smile and listen to our troubles. Their life experience gives them perspective and many older women I know do not, as we would say in Brooklyn, "put up with boloney." Thanks to their humor they can teach us not to take everything so seriously---and isn't that a gracious gift from God?

The elderly can teach us not to be preoccupied with death; they can relieve our anxieties. Indeed, they present to the young and fearful, a prophetic disposition of joy that comes from trust in God. Elizabeth is joyful and energized and she greets Mary. I imagine her ebullience was uplifting for Mary, whose pregnancy would have been awkward for a young, single girl. Elizabeth enthusiastically names the work that God is doing. In her proclamation to Mary, Luke describes Elizabeth in terms reserved for the prophets; she is "filled with the Holy Spirit." Elizabeth announces joy, even in a situation that, at first, may seem frightening and confusing to Mary. In particular Elizabeth, in this story, reminds us of those of older women who mentor and support new mothers, including unwed young mothers; abused women and their children; alcohol and drug addicted girls; the orphaned and runaway children. Older women also help young women find jobs, learn new skills in the home and office. Like Elizabeth older women, long

practiced in their faith, help younger ones interpret God's Word and hear the Good News of salvation.

### **GOOD BOOKS FOR THE PREACHER**

I found the following books very helpful for this Sunday's reflections:

Newsom, Carol A. and Ringe, H. Sharon eds. The Women's Bible Commentary.

Westminster: John Knox Press, 1992. ISBN 0-281-04581-X

Johnson, Elizabeth A. Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints. New York: Continuum, 2003. ISBN 0-8264-1473-7

Reid, Barbara E. Choosing the Better Part: Women in the gospel of Luke.

Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996. ISBN 0-8146-5494-0

### **QUOTABLE**

Exile and homecoming. Our lives are marked by exile, another central image of Advent and another primary biblical image for our condition. Exile expresses that sense of being separated from that to which we belong and that yearning for "home" which runs so deeply within us. Like Israel, we mourn "in lonely exile here," yearning for the coming of Immanuel, who is God with us. Christmas is about the end of exile and coming home—not to the home of our childhood, which is forever gone, but coming to be at home with God. At home with God, we can also be at home in the world. "There's no place like home for the holidays is true in more ways than one."

□ Marcus J. Borg, "Christmas Then and Now," in *The Living Pulpit*", October-December 1995. Volume 4, No. 4, page 6.

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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