

## AT THE HEART OF THE STORY...

### Advent 3 – Cycle B: Luke 1:39-55

#### A Meditation for Pageant Sunday

Several times recently, I have spoken of the prominence of women in Luke's gospel, and this morning in a narrative that illustrates the significance of Elizabeth's and Mary's pregnancies, in an account that anticipates the important relationship their two babies, we encounter it again. But beyond their prominence is the conspicuous faith and discernment these two women reveal in their response to the miracle of their respective pregnancies. Forgive my understatement, but both pregnancies were extremely unlikely, but as we see throughout Hebrew scripture, an unlikely pregnancy is a sign of God's intervention in human history. But Luke doesn't leave this point between the lines: in their dialogue, the two women proclaim their faith in the God of miracles. Mary's unannounced visit to Elizabeth is the confirmation of the intuitions Elizabeth has had concerning her unlikely pregnancy. We know of her intuitions because she interprets her baby's kicks from the womb as a sign that both she and Mary are participants in God's divine purpose of effecting change for the people of Israel. Recognizing Mary's faith as well, Elizabeth says of Mary, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And then, in this song that we know as the Magnificat, its title taken from the first word of the later Latin version of the hymn ["Magnificat anima mea Dominum et exsultavit spiritus meus in Deo salutari meo..."], Mary reflects on how her pregnancy, especially, has all the marks of God's saving ways about it. She remembers Hannah and the song she sang in response to God's promise that she, who was barren, would bear Samuel. She thinks of how God's mercy has been revealed over and over again in the history of the Jewish people: their survival itself a miracle! Her references to past events are general, but we cannot help thinking of how David, the youngest and gentlest of Jesse's sons became Israel's greatest king; of how under David's leadership all of Israel's enemies were defeated; of how the last food of the starving widow of Zarephath – a handful of meal and a little oil in a jug – provided bread not only for her and her son, but the prophet Elijah as well for many days; of how the people of Israel received daily bread, meat, and water during their years of wandering in the wilderness; of how, at length, the people returned from the Babylonian exile. Mary, especially, understands that what is happening to her and to Elizabeth is in continuity with God's mercy and grace shown over and over again in times past. God's promises continue to be fulfilled, she sings: "*my* soul magnifies the Lord."

At the heart of the story of Jesus' birth is Mary, with eyes wide open in seeing and responding to the past, the present, and the future. Grace and mercy are not bound by time, she testifies. Wherever there is great need, great longing, great hunger, great injustice, there also is God.

And Mary's and Elizabeth's prominence in Luke's gospel is presented to us as a cue; that this is where we are to enter the timeless pageant of God's blessing the world through the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus; that, like Mary, we are to open our eyes wide to recognize that God works through people, ordinary people – through you and me; that faith itself is a sign, and that faith calls for our response.

Elizabeth was not the baptizer. Mary was not the Christ. But Luke shows us that without these two faithful women, God's proclamation in Jesus would never have been heard. At the heart of God's story, this Christmas story we love so much, are Mary, and Elizabeth, and you, and me.