



O come, o come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice, rejoice! Immanuel shall come to you, O Israel.¹

Our waiting is nearly at an end. The angel Gabriel appeared to the priest Zechariah and foretold the birth of a son: John the Baptizer. Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife, who had been barren is now six months pregnant. A miracle. Bearing a child will erase Elizabeth's shame and restore her to her full place in society. Elizabeth says: "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people" (Luke 1:25). God is good. God has answered prayers.

The Angel Gabriel then appears to Mary and tells her that she also will bear a son. This time, though, rather than a barren elderly woman, the mother is a young girl. Engaged but not married. As Elizabeth's shame is being ended, Mary's is potentially starting. It doesn't seem fair. It doesn't seem like the same God: one ending shame and one potentially beginning to be shamed.

But Mary doesn't hear the Angel Gabriel as bringing shame but rather as bringing joy and light and love. Perhaps because Gabriel starts their conversation with "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you" (1:28). Being assured that the Lord is with her and values her, Mary can accept the news with some equanimity although I imagine there was still a good deal of uncertainty about how this would turn out. Gabriel then tells Mary about Elizabeth, perhaps giving Mary a lifeline of sorts- that is, connection to her cousin.

¹ "O Come, o come Immanuel" Hymnal 1982, 56.

Micah 5: 2-5; Canticle 3; Hebrews 10: 5-10; Luke 1: 39-55

So Mary set out with haste following the visit of the Angel Gabriel to visit Elizabeth. Perhaps to compare notes on being unexpectedly pregnant. Perhaps to compare notes about a visit from an Angel. Perhaps to compare notes on how Gabriel and God were working in their lives. Perhaps simply for comfort from a cousin and a friend.

The arrival of Mary at Elizabeth's house starts with John leaping for joy in Elizabeth's womb. And then Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit in Mary reaching out to Holy Spirit in Elizabeth. God working wonders in the lives of two women.

Mary is celebrated and remembered in our faith tradition as one who, though lowly in socio-economic status, and a woman in a very patriarchal society, was chosen by God to bear the Christ Child. God can appear to anyone at any time. God can appear to us even today. Are you listening? Are you willing to follow what God is calling you to be and to do to help bring God's kingdom to earth?

Are you willing to be a Mary or an Elizabeth who, though uncertain and I imagine rather overwhelmed, still said "yes" to God. And to bear or father a child, literally or figuratively, who may change the world. Or to mentor a child who has lost his or her parents or support system through no fault of his or her own. Are you willing to engage with a world that is broken and hurting through offering your gifts and talents?

God appears to each and every one of us this day and each day. Our challenge is to be open to God's presence, in joy and in sorrow. To rejoice when a child is born. To grieve when a loved one dies. To remember that God is present in every living creature and is valued by God being created by God.

As Mary sings the *Magnificat* we, too, can sing out and our souls magnify the Lord for God has looked upon each of us with love and with compassion.

Mary is just beginning her journey. It will be a journey – a life – filled with all the wonderful and the hard things of being a mother. Sometimes filled with exasperation such as when Mary and Joseph find that Jesus has stayed behind at the Temple and they have to go back three days journey to bring him home. A life that will have moments of deep despair when Jesus is hung on the cross to die. But those moments are not yet.

For now, her life is filled, I imagine, with wonder and joy at the life growing in her. At what the Angel Gabriel really meant when he told her that her son would be holy and would be called Son of God. Something no one else had ever birthed. Something no one else could really give her advice on how to respond. And so Mary stays with Elizabeth for three months. A time of comfort and conversation about the new things that God was doing both for Elizabeth and for Mary.

Advent can be a time of comfort and conversation for us. A time when we can ponder in our hearts how God is speaking to us. We can give thanks for new birth. We can grieve those who have died. We can rest in the sure and certain knowledge that our God is with us in joy and in our grief. Advent – a time of waiting, a time for pondering, a time to be with God.

Micah 5: 2-5; Canticle 3; Hebrews 10: 5-10; Luke 1: 39-55

To close, I'd like to quote from the Obituary of Mackenzie J. DeClue, who died on December 9th.

Throughout a four-year battle with brain cancer, Mac DeClue found strength in the following words:

His cancer could not cripple love, shatter hope, dissolve faith or destroy peace. It could not kill friendship, suppress memories, silence courage or invade the soul. Cancer could not steal eternal life or conquer his spirit.²

Just as the Holy Spirit came upon Elizabeth and Mary, I believe the Holy Spirit was present with Mac. Mac's advent has come to fruition even as ours continues. May the Holy Spirit be present with you in this time of waiting, in this time of rejoicing in new life and new possibilities. Amen.

² www.jewellrittman.com/obituaries/print?o_id=5756877 (12/172018)