

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Cycle C – December 29, 2015

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Reflections on **Luke 1:39-45**

Here we are at the last Sunday of Advent. We've waited in prayer, in meditation, with Advent devotions; we've waited in anticipation for Christ our Light to break through the darkness.

Tonight we may feel different from who we were four weeks ago. We may have renewed or deepened our relationship with Jesus; or our understanding of mercy, or compassion, or forgiveness; or God's grace poured out so abundantly. We've prepared our hearts and minds for the coming of Jesus into our human experience.

Many who teach homiletics suggest that preachers should begin their preparation by finding their pearl. Read the scripture a few times and sit quietly with it. Soon an image or some wording will emerge for you. That's the pearl. That's what you can't not preach about.

I found two pearls in Luke's gospel. One is those first words, "Mary set out." A direct, simple statement but with something of the unknown about it, and something so brave about it. The second pearl is a single word – *blessed*, used three times in the gospel.

Luke's gospel is the only one which tells the story we read tonight—the Visitation. He writes of Mary's visit with her cousin Elizabeth. Acknowledging that Jesus and John are certainly the reason this piece would even be recorded, the two women, Mary and Elizabeth are the ones whom we follow in this narrative.

Both women are pregnant. Mary was thought of as barely old enough to carry a child, while Elizabeth was thought to be too old to conceive. It's not hard to imagine Mary wanting to be with Elizabeth, seeking wisdom and comfort from her older cousin.

So Mary and Joseph prepare for the journey

to see Elizabeth. Joseph gathers the help and supplies they need. They would need two loyal shepherds. The shepherds choose three reliable donkeys, a gentle one for Mary, a sturdy one for Joseph when he needed it, and one for supplies.

The travelers would need water, bread, dried fish and fruit, extra warm clothes, an extra basket for food they may receive from fellow travelers, or even from family who might live along the road.

They were prepared and, though this small group included Joseph and the shepherds, Mary is the one mentioned as they leave Nazareth.

So -- *Mary set out.*

It would be a long and taxing journey for the young mother. From Nazareth to Jerusalem was approximately seventy-miles. And Elizabeth lived in Ain Karem, a village just West of Jerusalem—an additional distance. The primary road to Jerusalem was hill country. Mary's donkey picked its way through the rocky places. Joseph must have walked alongside Mary, steadying her and protecting her from the blowing sand as they walked through the low places. Any young mother could have felt fear from time to time on such a journey, but Mary and her precious child were well cared for.

Tired and dusty, the travelers were happy when they finally arrived at Elizabeth's home.

At this point, Luke's story ceases to be Mary's and becomes that of Elizabeth, a woman of joy, of excitement and not one to hold it in. When Elizabeth heard her cousin, the infant leapt in her womb. John knew Jesus was there. Elizabeth's son, John the Baptizer who would herald Jesus' ministry, preparing the way for the Lord, would be born first, and was already stirring.

Elizabeth's greeting to her cousin was a

verbal embrace:

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

With the power of the Holy Spirit within her, Elizabeth didn't just say those words; she knelt and cried out in a loud voice, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!”

Just imagine what Elizabeth was thinking – the mother of the Savior was in her home, standing right there, and it was her cousin! What a moment! And Elizabeth didn't miss a bit of it. Again she spoke, “Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.”

Blessed, blessed, blessed. What a way to be greeted. “Blessed” means holy and sacred. The word sounds both loving and powerful at the same time. Loving because of the gentleness of wishing a blessing on someone; powerful because a blessing can change things. Our own name, the Catholic Church of the Beatitudes, derives from “beatitudes” meaning “supreme

blessedness.” Blessed proclaims our belief in the power of blessings to make things different. It certainly has for us and those we've touched.

Listen to some of the changes in the Beatitudes according to Luke: Blessed are you who are poor; for the reign of God is yours. Blessed are you who hunger; you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who are weeping; you shall laugh.

Blessed are *all* God's people. You are Holy. You are Sacred.

In my life, the word blessed still rings in my head from time to time. My mother concluded her letters, not with “Love, Alice” but with “God bless you.” When guests left our home, again, it was “God bless” you. Some of you may use that phrase when your children leave after a visit, or when you have to *leave* them on their first day of school – kindergarten, high school, college – it doesn't make any difference.

And if you have a cuddly infant in your life, try whispering into the little one's ear, “God bless you. You belong to God.”

And now Advent is ending;

The Light of Christ is near.

Our hearts are open.

There will be room in our inn.

For our guests and for the people of our Beatitudes community, I join with Elizabeth:

God bless all you holy women and men.

Amen!