

Advent IV (RCL/C): "In a Hurry, Pregnant with Hope, Listening for the Footfall of Angels"
Luke 1:39-55
December 22-23, 2018
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

'Tis the season -- when we move even faster than usual. Two more shopping days 'til Christmas, after all. What's that Pennsylvania Dutch saying? "The hurrieder I go, the behinder I get" ☺?? But we're not the only ones racing around. St. Luke says,

In those days Mary set out and went **with haste** to a Judean town in the hill country.... (Luke 1.39)

In *The Message* Eugene Peterson says, "Mary didn't waste a minute." Right after the angel Gabriel left her, "She got up and traveled to a town in Judah...." **Why** was she in such a hurry? Well, think of someone you love who prayed her entire adult life for a child and never had one. Imagine that person is now in her sixties or seventies, content to be the surrogate grandparent of the neighbors' kids. Imagine you just heard, out of the blue, almost unbelievably, she's expecting a baby and is signed up for Lamaze classes. Wouldn't **you** high tail it over to that expectant mother's home as soon as you could? And Mary had news of her own to share. Another reason she didn't waste a minute getting out of town might have been that she knew the pregnancy was going to be hard to explain.

Mary's trip to see her cousin Elizabeth is called the Visitation. 'Not quite as popular a topic for artists as the Annunciation, the angel Gabriel's surprise visit to the Virgin Mary, but there are still a number of famous paintings and etchings of those two pregnant ladies greeting each other, Mary very young and Elizabeth very old.

Carl Bloch was a nineteenth century Danish artist, who loved Rembrandt and played with light like he did. Bloch also studied and tried to emulate the old Italian masters. His

most famous series is 23 paintings of the life of Christ, commissioned for the King's Praying Chamber in the Frederiksborg Castle Chapel. One of those paintings depicts the Visitation. I have a copy here. Kindly, old, round-bellied Elizabeth reminds me of the nurse in *Romeo & Juliet*. Her smile is wonderful. Her arms are spread-eagle in joy, preparing to hug her beloved Mary, now even **more** precious because of the child she was bearing. A red cord is wrapped around Elizabeth's waist. Its color could represent the martyrdom of her as-yet-unborn son, John the Baptizer, whose earthly end was beheading by Herod.

Mary has long, long lashes. Her profile is wide-eyed, peaceful, happy. There is a slim golden halo hovering over the filmy veil covering her hair. She isn't blonde like a Dane or dark-skinned like a woman of the Middle East. She looks quite Italian, actually! Mary is dressed in a red robe and a deep blue, almost purple cloak. Those of us who were on the icon writing retreat in fall of 2009 learned that in Orthodox icons Mary is always robed in red, the color of the earth. This is because it is through Mary that the Word took on flesh. Her most exalted, most important title in the Eastern Church is the God-bearer, the Theotokos. In the western Church, Mary's color is usually blue, the color of heaven. Here, interestingly, Carl Bloch's Mary is clothed in both red **and** blue.

By Mary's left hand is a potted lily. In artwork of the Annunciation, Gabriel is often shown holding a lily in his hand. The lily is symbolic of Mary's purity as a virgin. It is, of course, also a symbol of the resurrection. Elizabeth's body is cruciform, with her bowed head and extended arms. Mary's position at the bottom of the steps on which Elizabeth stands reminds us of her position at the foot of the cross. The little orange flowers growing in the grass at the base of the lily remind me of the blossoms on a crown of thorns bush.... A larger petal seems to have fallen to the ground at the foot of the staircase. A little lizard is

there as well, to the left of the petal. I don't know if that's just a naturalistic touch, an "I Spy" hidden feature, or if that little guy represents the devil who tempted Eve to eat the apple in the Garden of Eden. Mary, the Mother of our Lord, has been referred to as the second Eve, who did not fall to temptation but who lovingly, trustingly, obediently said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1.38).

It is at this time of year that we're most mindful of the mother of our Lord. Do you remember how the angel Gabriel greeted her? "Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee!" (Luke 1.28) Then Elizabeth followed up with: "Blessed are thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb!" (Luke 1.42) Those two verses from Scripture are the first half of the Hail Mary, a prayer we prayed with our Spanish-speaking Roman Catholic brothers and sisters at the Las Posadas gathering in our Fellowship Hall last week.

Luther had a great devotion to Mary. Do you know what he said about her faith? "Had [Mary] not believed, she could not have conceived."¹ Luther said that the miracle of the Virgin's **faith** was greater than the miracle of the Virgin **birth** itself.

We associate the beatitudes with the Sermon on the Mount, but did you ever realize there's one tucked into the story of the Visitation too? Elizabeth says of Mary:

"...blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." (Luke 1.45)

Here's the paraphrase from *The Message*:

"Blessed woman who believed what God said, believed every word would come true!"

The two-thousand-year-old story of the Visitation intersects with our story today. From Mary's perspective, are **we** believing what God has said, believing that every word

will come true? From Elizabeth's perspective, is there a long-barren place in **our** lives, where we've stopped believing anything can grow?

"Blessed woman/blessed man who **believes** what God said, believes every word **will** come true!"

Finally, from Ann Weems' book, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, a poem called *Mary*,

Nazareth Girl:

Mary,
Nazareth girl:
What did you know of ethereal beings
with messages from God?
What did you know of men
when you found yourself with child?
What did you know of babies,
you, barely out of childhood yourself?
God-chosen girl:
What did you know of God
that brought you to this stable
blessed among women?
Could it be that you had been ready
waiting
listening
for the footsteps
of an angel?
Could it be there are messages for us
if we have faith to listen?

There's no hurrying God, though. We must wait and listen in Advent patience, in Advent hope, for however long it takes for God to speak or for us to hear, for the flame to catch, for the seed to germinate, for spiritual birth (or rebirth) to occur.... Let's wait and listen, together, for the footfall of angels.

Amen.

¹Roland H. Bainton, translator and arranger, *The Martin Luther Christmas Book*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1948), p. 23.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham