December 10th 2023

Theme: Mary visits Elizabeth  
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E te Atua aroha, e te Atua atawhai, kia whakapainga koe.  
(God of love, God of grace, we give you thanks).

(Black slide)

Video – the story of Elizabeth

Our gospel reading for today brings to conclusion the nativity story of Jesus’ birth in the Gospel of Luke.

The story of John’s birth to Elizabeth and Zechariah is an entry into the story of the birth of Jesus to Mary and Joseph. Luke is the only gospel that links the lives of John and Jesus in such an intimate way, identifying Elizabeth and Mary as relatives (1:36). Elizabeth gives birth to John in her old age; Mary gives birth to Jesus in her youth. Elizabeth gives birth to John six months before the birth of Jesus to Mary.

The spotlight shines on Mary and Elizabeth, two lowly and shamed ones through whom God has chosen to begin the transformation of the world.

We don't know the name of the town where Elizabeth and Zechariah lived. Guesses at the identity of the town indicate the journey was about 80 to 100 miles and would probably take Mary three to four days.

Now she seeks out Zechariah's home and greets her kinswoman Elizabeth. Since the town is near Jerusalem, it's likely that Mary has visited here before when her family has come to Jerusalem for Passover or another feast day. Elizabeth, now six months pregnant, comes to the door and sees her niece. She hasn't expected her, but now Mary greets her. For the Jews, greeting is an important ceremony. Jesus regularly instructs his disciples to offer a greeting of "Peace to you," in homes that they enter (10:5). This word of peace, when received, functions like a powerful blessing upon the householder.

Though Luke clearly signals that the unborn child’s leaping is prompted by the Spirit, it is Elizabeth, John’s mother, who takes on the role of prophet by speaking the prophetic word in this scene: she is filled with the Holy Spirit and proclaims what Mary **has not yet told her**, and what is not yet visible to the eye: Mary is pregnant. Furthermore, through the Spirit she knows who Mary’s child will be, for she calls Mary “the mother of my Lord.” Her prophecy will soon be fulfilled when her own son prepares the way for the Lord.

By greeting Mary in return with honour, Elizabeth overturns social expectations. Mary is an unmarried pregnant woman. She might expect social judgment, shame, even ostracism from her older kinswoman. Yet Elizabeth knows from her own experience the cost of being shamed and excluded. In her culture a woman’s primary purpose in life was to bear children, so as an elderly infertile wife she had endured a lifetime of being treated as a failure. Her response to her miraculous pregnancy emphasizes that God’s grace has reversed her social status: “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people” (Luke 1:25). At long last, in her old age, she is an honourable married woman, pregnant with her husband’s son.

Elizabeth continues the pattern of social reversal by opening her arms and her home to a relative whom her neighbours would expect her to reject. Instead of shaming Mary, she welcomes, blesses, and celebrates her, treating her as more honourable than herself. Thus, the pregnancy that might have brought Mary shame brings joy and honour instead. When Elizabeth welcomes Mary, she practices the same kind of inclusive love that Jesus will show to prostitutes and sinners. She sees beyond the shamefulness of Mary’s situation to the reality of God’s love at work even among those whom society rejects and excludes.

While Elizabeth's husband had doubted what the Lord had told him -- and was made mute because of it -- Mary had believed. This very trip south to Judea was evidence of her belief, for she was acting it out, coming to visit the one person whom God had prepared to help her -- Elizabeth.

Elizabeth’s words and actions invite us to reflect on our own openness to the ways that God chooses to act in our world. What is God doing through unexpected people in our society today? Where is God at work through people whom our society often excludes or treat as shameful?

Elizabeth had asked, "Why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (1:44). God provided Elizabeth to Mary as a kind of spiritual grandmother -- a pregnant grandmother at that! -- who would nurture her and encourage her in the Lord. Elizabeth was her instructor and teacher, her friend and confidant, her mentor and advocate. God gave Elizabeth to Mary for a special period of time and a special purpose.

Maybe this teaches us that we don't need to see God working in the world or solving our personal problems before we can leap for joy. We don't have to understand what God is doing, or even know his plans. The joy that we receive, which comes from recognizing the presence of Christ, is God's Christmas gift to us.

So, may we, like Elizabeth and Mary, trust that God is coming to save and free us. May we, like them, give thanks that God has taken away any bad baggage we may be carrying, and then respond to God’s love by welcoming others whom Society regards as shameful. May we, like them, become a people that actively supports each other as we hope and wait for God’s reign of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love; reminded at this time each year, that we too have been blessed by the birth of this child.