

“Singing after The Quickening”

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An Advent Reflection

Luke 1:26-45

December 4, 2016

I have an announcement. Barb and I are expecting . . . to upgrade to smartphones this year. Sometimes these things “just happen.” You might think we are too old, especially since I have never had a smartphone before. Miracles.

That’s my news. Elizabeth’s was this: she expecting . . . a baby! She was past childbearing age. She had never been able to conceive. But one day, Zechariah came home after serving in the Temple. (Zechariah was a priest.) He was alarmingly silent (even for a husband!) He looked perplexed.

Even without speaking, though, they found ways to communicate. And . . . well . . . she got pregnant. Surprise! Now it was Elizabeth’s turn to be perplexed! And Zechariah, he seemed less surprised and more full of wonder. Still silent, though.

Weeks turned into months. Elizabeth was experiencing her body as she had never before. It was wondrous. It was hard. Elizabeth was no young maiden.

That reminds me. Up in a tiny place called Nazareth, a young maiden, a relative of Elizabeth, was having her own surprising, perplexing and wondrous experience.

Now in the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a village of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary.

And having come in, the angel said to her, “Rejoice, highly favoured one, the Lord is with you!”

But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was.

Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.”

Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?”

And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to

be born will be called the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.”

Then Mary said, “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.”

And the angel departed from her.

Now Mary arose in those days and went into the hill country with haste, to a village of Judah, and entered the house of Zacharias and greeted Elizabeth. And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Then she spoke out with a loud voice and said, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. Blessed is she who believed that there will be a fulfilment of those things which were told her from the Lord.”

Luke 1:26-45

New King James Version (alt)

II

“Quickening” is the moment when a mom first feels her child move inside her. I am not an expert, so I asked my beloved. She talks about how our child would push out and she’d push back, like they were playing a game. She could tell which part it was: a foot, a fist, a bum. It was an intimacy like none other, our child protected and held, growing and forming. It was a relationship, such that when the baby finally was born, they already knew each other.

When Mary visited, Elizabeth was more than six months pregnant. She had felt this “quickening,” the movements of life in her.

But Mary arrives! Elizabeth’s baby — who will be called John, and whose job it will be to prepare the way for Jesus — he leaps! A joyful skip! Playful delight.¹ The fetus John reacts so, because he is close to the fetus Jesus.

Elizabeth is filled with a jumpy baby. And, she is “quickened” by the Holy Spirit. God’s Wisdom fills her, so she realizes it is not just baby-stuff going on. It is God-stuff.

¹ *skirtaó*

III

Moved by God, Elizabeth becomes a prophet. She sees more than her natural eyes, feels more than her physical body can tell her. She knows what God is doing. She shouts out — she is not shy to proclaim this — declaring the amazing words we read together.

Notice what Elizabeth does.²

She is older. Mary is younger.

Elizabeth is from a prestigious family, with status. Her husband is a priest! Mary's side of the family is of simple means. She has no husband.

Elizabeth is blessed. After waiting so long, and giving up hope, she is now having her baby. . . . Yet, she proclaims that young, unwed Mary is the one “blessed among women.”

Elizabeth knows her child is special. Whatever Zechariah has been able to communicate to her — remember, he cannot speak — it is obvious that God is doing something extraordinary. . . . Yet, Elizabeth proclaims that Mary's child is the blessed one.

She calls him her Lord. Mary's child . . . Elizabeth's Lord.

Shouting Elizabeth and her leaping child joyfully reverence Mary and her Child.

IV

She reveres Mary. For folks with Protestant sensibilities, that can make us nervous.

As a child, I would visit my great-grandmother: French-Canadian, Roman Catholic, named Mary (of course). Her home was full of Rosary beads and statues of the Blessed Virgin. I knew enough to know that was not for me. I was a Protestant, and fiercely proud of it³ . . . whatever that meant. Unless we were playing football, we had nothing to do with “Hail Marys.”

The Hail Mary . . . *Ave Maria*:

*Áve María, grátia pléna,
Dóminus técum.*⁴

*Hail Mary, full of grace,
the Lord is with thee.*

² Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 94, 96.

³ A line from Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*.

⁴ Listen here to the whole prayer in Latin: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kbE4atIom-o>

Notice, that's pretty much what the angel Gabriel said when he greeted Mary with the great news.⁵

The prayer continues:

*Blessed art thou amongst women,
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.*

Take out the "Jesus" word, and that's how Elizabeth began her greeting.

So this first part of the Hail Mary is very biblical. It's the second part that Protestants object to.

*Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death.*

It is not our practice to pray to Mary or saints, asking them to speak to God on our behalf. So we have tended to downplay Mary's significance.

V

But Elizabeth, God's prophet, does not spare anything in her celebration of Mary.

She marvels at how favoured she is, simply because Mary has come to see her.

She marvels at the reaction Mary's presence creates in her and her unborn child.

She marvels at how blessed her young cousin is. Mary is blessed because of what she is believing.

Believing . . . Mary brought to God's salvation work her trust that what God said God will do, God will do.⁶

God promised to rescue and redeem God's People, from all slavery, all oppression, all injustice and exploitation. God promised us the Messiah, the Saviour, the One in whom God will do this salvation work. The Messiah (the Christ) will rule on God's behalf. He will rule as God rules. He will rule Israel, and all nations, and all of creation, in truth and peace. All will flourish. All will love. All because God loves.

God promised this. Mary trusted God to deliver, by her coming delivery, God's deliverance. She trusted, she believed, so she is blessed.

⁵ The English version of the Hail Mary reflects the Douay–Rheims translation, the authoritative translation for English-speaking Roman Catholics until the multiplication of translations in the 20th century.

⁶ Raymond Brown, [The Birth of the Messiah](#) (New York: Image Doubleday, 1977), 344.

VI

Mary is blessed because of whom she is bearing.

We should celebrate Mary . . . if it leads us to an even greater celebration of her Child.

Elizabeth calls Mary "the mother of *my Lord*." Later, Christians realized it is fitting to call her the "mother of *God*."⁷ The *Ave Maria* prayer does it, and it is right!

"Mother of God" does not mean that God's origin was in her, or that Mary was divine. Mary of Nazareth was as much a creature of God as you and me. "Mother of God" honours Mary because of the extraordinary, unparalleled significance of her son, Jesus. In Jesus, God-the-Son has come to us, in person, fully-human and fully-God. He is the one whom Mary carried, birthed, nursed, and mothered.

Debbie Blue is one of the founding pastors of House of Mercy church in Minnesota.⁸ I am going to read something she wrote. As you hear it, remember that in many traditions, including Israel, and the Christian church through most of our history, women have been blocked off from the holiest things, and places, and tasks, and positions.

Now, listen to this: "*Mary's womb becomes the Temple out of which [God] will emerge clothed in flesh. . . . Mary becomes the 'house' that will build 'god' out of her cells and blood—in her womb, with her breast milk.*"⁹

Mary, the temple. Mary, from whom will come the Glory of God.

So of course she is blessed. For she will birth the Blessing. The Blessing, Jesus, who is your hope, your healing. Jesus, who is your forgiveness, your repentance, your reconciliation. Jesus, who is your death to sin's power to enslave you. Jesus, who is your resurrection to the new creation.

Jesus who quickens you. Because of him, in you there is life.

And Mary felt his quickening, first. Praise be to God!

⁷ The term for this is *Theotokos*, which means "Mother of God" or "God-birther." The term, and its theological significance, dates back to at least the 3rd century. It was affirmed at the Third Ecumenical Council in Ephesus in 431. Martin Luther affirmed this as a vital teaching of the church.

See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theotokos>.

⁸ <http://debbieblue.com/>

⁹ Debbie Blue, "Mary the Mother of God" on the blog THQ: The Hardest Question. Post for December 18, 2011 lectionary readings. <http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/yearb/advent4gospel-2/>. I substituted the word "God" for Blue's use of "Yahweh," a word I usually avoid it possible in sensitivity to important Jewish wisdom against speaking the Divine Name.