

Mary and Elizabeth. Two women. Two Jewish women related to each other meeting to talk about family matters. Both of them are pregnant under extremely unusual circumstances, but that's not all that they have in common. Mary is a young girl engaged to a carpenter from the family of King David. According to the Orthodox tradition, Mary's father, Joachim, was also a descendant from the house of David. Elizabeth is much older and her family comes from the priestly house of Aaron. The Orthodox hold that Mary's mother, Anne, was Elizabeth's aunt. Elizabeth is married to a priest, Zechariah, from the house of Abijah.

My point is this: Mary and Elizabeth come from good Jewish families. They are not wealthy and, despite centuries of our romanticizing them, they are also not particularly poor. In many ways, both families are fairly ordinary.

The author of Luke's Gospel must consider us family to allow us to listen in on this intimate and private conversation. That's true for all Christians, but especially for those of us here in this place because St. Elizabeth is our matron saint. Some refer to this house as "St. Elizabeth" without the possessive "s" at the end. That's fine, because this is a church of God, not a church of one saint—a sensibility that came from the Protestant Reformation. Episcopalians, of course, also make room for another interpretation. To refer to this house as "St. Elizabeth's" brings back the ancient practice of naming churches after women and men who glorified God through their earthly lives—people to whom we are bound in Christ by sacrament, prayer and praise.

When we pray, our trust is that Elizabeth prays with us and when we worship, that she worships with us. Our hope is that by taking her as our matron, we might assume some of her holy qualities. We look to Mary with the same trust and hope, and we join in the love that these women share in this passage.

When Mary arrived, she embraced Elizabeth, who was pregnant with the child who would become John the Baptist. Mary *embraced* Elizabeth in the fullest sense. The Greek word implies more than a simple greeting. Mary *drew* Elizabeth to herself, bringing her unborn son and Elizabeth's unborn son close together for the first time. The icon on the front of your bulletin shows Mary and Elizabeth about to be cheek-to-cheek, embracing each other with both arms, conveying a sense of union and solidarity.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child "leaped" in her womb and she herself was "filled with the Holy Spirit." So filled, that she erupted with a great cry: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" Elizabeth is joyfully inspired because God's grace has appeared in yet another unexpected way that even her unborn child has recognized.

So, too, has her cousin, Mary. Instead of worrying about an out-of-wedlock pregnancy or denying the unusual circumstances she has found herself in, Mary responds with one of the most beautiful poems in all our scripture: "My soul," or perhaps more accurately, "my *life essence* magnifies the Lord," she sings, "my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!"

She sings for her cousin, Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah, but she also sings for the Mighty One who has done great things for her. She sings for the archangel, St. Gabriel, who brought God's astonishing messages to Mary and to Zechariah. She sings for Abraham and Sarah, for Isaac and Rebekah, for Jacob and Leah and Rachel, for Moses and Miriam—"for every son and daughter of Israel who thought God had forgotten the promise to be with them forever, to love them forever, to give them fresh and endless life.<sup>1</sup>"

Mary sings for everyone—for you and for me and for all of creation—because she bears the Son of God for the benefit of everyone. When the proud from every generation encounter the Christ-child, God has already put in place that which turns the imaginations of self-satisfied hearts to see beyond themselves.

The theme of reversals in Luke's Gospel often places the powerful and the powerless or the rich and the poor in contrast to each other. And for centuries, some in the church have used this passage to shake an accusing finger at the mighty and to stand those of low degree on a pedestal. Some take Luke's Mary literally, as though she were saying that those who are materially underprivileged will be fed with literal food, and those with political and financial resources will be stripped of their money and influence and sent away with nothing. They claim that if you are a person of means, well, you have already received all the reward you are going to get and that, in time, those who don't have money will get their turn.

That's one tough bull to ride. There's some truth in it, but the punishing attitude makes that truth hard to hold on to. Especially because, although most of us here in this room would not consider ourselves powerful, from a global perspective, we are all relatively rich. Luke's reversals *should* prick our

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. *Home by Another Way*. Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1999.

consciences in a way that prompts us to rethink our actions, but overly literal or payback versions make Mary sound like she's campaigning for Occupy Wall Street, not reveling in God's good graces.

There is a second way to understand this contrast that takes the sting out of Mary's prophecy. There have been others in the church who say that the word "rich" is only a metaphor for being smug or presumptuous, and "poor" is a metaphor as in "poor in spirit" meaning that we are aware of our flaws, and that we rely on God and know that we need other people. From a purely allegorical perspective, those of us who are really rather well-off by global standards can relax because we are actually "poor," even if we can feed and clothe ourselves.

That's some mighty thin broth. There is some comforting truth in it, but there's not much meat and nowhere near enough spice. Fortunately, as Episcopalians, we make room for yet another interpretation that borrows some truth from both those approaches. Luke's Gospel releases life-affirming insights for everyone if we respect the author's subtle and nuanced artistry. To begin with, for Luke and for Luke's original audience, the terms "rich" and "poor" carried more than just literal socioeconomic and political status. To describe a person as "rich" meant they could defend their honor or position, while to be "poor" meant to be vulnerable or open to attack and loss.

Now, remember how we started. Mary and Elizabeth are in an intimate and joyful conversation about the miraculous touch of God. This passage is not about retribution, but about reunion. It is not about regret, but rejoicing.

Mary, the God-bearer, bursts into song because God has already made the powerful and the lowly *equals* in Christ. Through Mary, Luke resolves the interwoven relationship between material wealth and the spiritual temptation that can come with wealth—the temptation to a sense of self-sufficiency that separates people from God and from each other, sometimes to the point of arrogance.

Those who are literally poor in resources tend to know from day to day just how much they really do need other people and how much they need God. And Mary rejoices because God has unchained them from the temptations that can come with poverty—temptations to adopt an identity of victimhood, to see oneself as a victim only, that can separate people from God and each other, even to the point of resentment.

What God has done is to release us all from the bondages of separation. We are no longer bound by what we have nor by what we do not have. We are no longer *identified* by our earthly status. Mary sings her song in recognition

that what we *are* is children of God. We do not have to defend our status nor do we have to be afraid of our vulnerability. We are, all of us, children of God.

The hungry are to be filled with good things: food and shelter, yes, but also with beauty, with gratitude, with community, with justice and mercy. The rich are to be sent away empty: some of their earthly resources given away, yes, but also emptied of fear, emptied of attachments, emptied of illusions that separate them from God.

God's mercy is for everyone who experiences God's presence with awe—one family in union and solidarity, like Elizabeth and Mary. One family of God's children learning to recognize that it is less about what we *do* and more about what we *are* that allows Christ to live in the world. That's how the essence of our lives can magnify the Lord, and it will not really be Christmas until we do.

Sharing our lives with each other, we can become like Elizabeth, excited to point out the Christ we see in others. That which is holy within us will leap for joy. Opening ourselves to prayerful self-reflection, we can become like Mary, reveling in the Christ in ourselves, even in the Christ waiting to be born from us as our spirits rejoice in God our savior.

For God has looked with favor on each of you and surely all generations will call you blessed. The Mighty One has done great things for you and holy is God's name.