

## ***Sanctuary***

Fourth Sunday of Advent  
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, December 20, 2009  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Micah 5:2-5a; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55

Let's pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Our college freshman—our daughter Sarah—is home for the holidays. She is delighted for the long break. We Eastons are delighted to have her here for awhile. I'm sure that coming back to her own comfy bed, and spending time watching TV in the family room with a purring cat on her lap are reason enough for her gladness. Or perhaps it's my cooking and my laundering skills for which Sarah longed, for these past four months of Fall semester. After all, I did make her lasagna this weekend. Plus, I managed to hide half the Christmas cookies and the last of the Camp Hill High School band fudge in the freezer, so the rest of us wouldn't eat them up before Sarah arrived and had a crack at them. And I really don't mind the ton of laundry she brought home. It's just good to have Sarah here.

Eventually, our daughter will have to return to Susquehanna University for her Spring semester. But I hope that, besides the cooking and laundering and purring cat, there is another reason why Sarah was delighted to be home for awhile before heading back to school. I hope she knows our home is a place where she is loved and understood. It is a place where she is always welcome and always belongs. It is a place where she is guaranteed someone will listen to, nurture and encourage her.

When I hear the story about Mary visiting Elizabeth—the Gospel story from Luke we heard today—I wonder if maybe those are some of the same reasons why Mary visits her cousin's home. Because she knows she will be welcomed, loved and understood. Because it's a place where she is guaranteed someone will listen to, nurture and encourage her.

And it's obvious Mary needed such a place. She is betrothed—formally engaged to a devout Jewish carpenter named Joseph—but that doesn't make her pregnancy any less socially scandalous. I don't know if tongues were wagging in Nazareth, where Mary lived. But even if tongues weren't wagging and people weren't gossiping about Mary's indelicate situation, don't you suppose Mary was bound to consider that a visit to her kinswoman Elizabeth, who also happened to be pregnant, would be a bit like finding sanctuary, a haven where Mary could reflect on all that happened and all that lay ahead of her? That's what I think is occurring here in Luke's Gospel.

For just prior to Mary's visiting Elizabeth, the angel Gabriel came to Mary and informed her she would carry a child, conceived by the Holy Spirit. Gabriel told her this child would be great and would save his people. Mary accepted her role as the

mother of this child, accepted her role as a servant of God—at least she says so out loud to Gabriel. But whether she had any fears or misgivings deep down inside is another story, and quite unclear. Luke simply tells us Mary went to visit Elizabeth with haste. Upon learning what was happening in her own body and in her world, Mary **hurried** to see Elizabeth.

What Mary found in Elizabeth was a strong connection and a sense of community that only confirmed the goodness of God at work in their lives. It's apparent Elizabeth truly understood what Mary was going through. Her own pregnancy was nothing short of miraculous for a woman long past childbearing years, and it too was God's gift. So there would be no looking down her nose at Mary or whispering to the rest of the extended family of the disgrace the young "maiden" had brought to them. No, on the contrary, Elizabeth rejoiced with Mary at this bewildering but blessed turn of events that altered their lives and the world forever.

However, if that had been **all** that Mary found in Elizabeth, Mary might just have opted to stay at Elizabeth's house until her baby was born. A regular nine month Coffee-klatsch—knitting booties, talking baby talk, comparing pregnancy symptoms—it would be oh-so-comfy and cozy. But Luke tells us Mary discovered something more in that visit with Elizabeth. Luke tells us that when Mary arrived at her kinswoman's home, Elizabeth was suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit, and cried out these words: *Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?...And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.*

Elizabeth becomes a prophetess. She speaks for God here! She knows that the child Mary carries is our Lord. Elizabeth knows Mary has been informed as such by Gabriel. Elizabeth knows this, and then commends Mary for believing all of it and trusting God with all of it.

You see, what Mary also found in Elizabeth was the divine encouragement to embrace this new role to which God called her. And to embrace that role as the mother of our Lord was to go back to Nazareth and bear him and fulfill prophecy. Whether tongues wagged or not.

What Elizabeth creates in that temporary sanctuary of her home is a haven where Mary can rejoice aloud, and begin to grapple with and contemplate how God has the power to change the direction in which the world is heading, and she, blessed by God's grace, gets to be a part of it all. How grateful we are for Elizabeth's prophetic encouragement and Mary's trusting acceptance! The interplay in their special relationship is a small but crucial part of the whole wonderful story Luke tells of the birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord come to us.

That's one of the reasons I love this story so much—Elizabeth and Mary show us that such sanctuaries exist, and they are truly blessings from God. For you see, each one of us needs, at times, a sanctuary—a haven where we feel welcomed and loved and understood. Naturally, for some of us, our homes and families represent

that sanctuary, and the coming days, though fraught with stress and worry and too many Christmas cookies, can be a time when those family connections fill us with joy. I pray all of us find such connection and community.

But, frankly, not all families and homes provide sanctuary. So, I'm praying this fellowship of sisters and brothers that we are here at Trinity will help fill that family sanctuary role—that you and I will welcome, love and encourage one another, and all who enter this space. In fact, our Lord purposes this very worship time to be a sanctuary for you and me. The Word received in lesson, sermon, and meal is much like Elizabeth. For we hear and taste in that Word a welcoming and a loving, a knowing and an understanding from God himself, who has invited us to be here and visit with him awhile. But not in order for us to stay here. This is just a way station for you and me. For that same Word of God is also at work encouraging us through the Holy Spirit, calling us to embrace new deeds of goodness in the world, sending us back out again.

In our journeys may we come to realize that we have a crucial part to play in Luke's wonderful story too. We are granted the task of bearing Christ into the world. In a sense, you and I are pregnant with all the glorious possibilities of what our mighty Lord can do in and through us. **Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.**