

“New Life X2” – Luke 1:39-55 – Advent 4 – Dec 201/09

“Elizabeth!” Mary calls out breathlessly to her cousin as she enters the courtyard of the house. “Where are you?!”

“Over here!” comes the answer, and Elizabeth runs to greet Mary.

“I’ve – I’ve – got – got – the – the – most – most – exciting – exciting – news – news !” they both exclaim in unison, excitedly sharing their good news with each other. Now to the male mind this seems like so much noise and confusion, with two people talking at once and seemingly nobody listening. Elizabeth – my wife, that is, not Mary’s cousin – continually reminds me that this is a male phenomenon, that by contrast females do not see this kind of dual conversation as a problem, that they are accustomed to multiple simultaneous conversations. I guess she’s right – I’m reminded of my earlier images of teenage girls – you know how they tend to travel in tight little groups, giggling and conspiring in whispers, and when one turns the whole group turns with a flash of colour like a school of fish. (Teenage boys do the same, sort of, but their groups tend to be more like a herd of sea lions, all pushing and shoving and noise.) These days it’s even more accentuated online – I’m amused to watch my granddaughter Genevieve’s “conversations” with her friends on Facebook with the mind-bending rapid-fire shifts and more abbreviations and code language than a cold-war spy! In any event, this scene from Luke’s gospel highlighting the encounter between Elizabeth and Mary has for me the flavour of a “girl group” or perhaps even a ‘chick flick’.

Now please understand that with that statement I have no intention of demeaning either Mary or Elizabeth, or women in general, or for that matter even Luke. But for me this particular scene that Luke uses as a bridge between the birth story of John the Baptist and the birth story of Jesus describes in a wondrously real way the excitement of two women sharing profound personal secrets. The realistic characterizations here give this story a huge stamp of authenticity, and illustrate Luke’s insight into the incident, an insight so complete and so detailed that he must have heard the story from at least one of the women many, many times.

There can be little doubt in anyone’s mind that the story was related by both Mary and Elizabeth as a story of great joy, mixed with wondrous awe. Great joy, with the stirring of new life in the womb. Wondrous awe, with the realization of God at work in these happenings. Both women are clearly filled with joy and happiness for each other and for themselves.

It’s easy to share in their excitement, to relish with them the promise of new life – times 2! But there’s a twinge of worry as well, because there was little apparent reason for them to be so happy. They lived in difficult times in the Middle East, times that bore many characteristics familiar to today. Their land was occupied by the armies of the current superpower. Trouble and strife rose up frequently in the struggles between the occupying forces and those who were variously described as terrorists / freedom fighters, rebels / resistance, murderers / minutemen, depending on who was doing the describing. It didn’t seem to be a particularly good time to bring a new baby into the world, a baby who could easily get lost in the ever-widening gap between the poor and the wealthy, the oppressed and the powerful, the downtrodden humble and the strutting proud. The joy and excitement of a new baby at the same time fostered deep concern as to whether that baby would survive, and grow, and find fulfillment in life.

I think we recognize those concerns and dangers because they still exist today. Here in comfortable Vancouver the probability of a safe and successful birth is extremely high, largely due to superb health care facilities – yes, superb, especially when compared to much of the rest of the world. The ready availability of medical attention, fresh clean water, nutritious food, warm clothing, safe and comfortable housing means that any baby born here has an excellent chance to not only live, but to grow and prosper. Yes, there are exceptions, but the worst of the exceptions here are better than the

best of what's available to a huge proportion of the babies born into this world. Unfortunately places still abound in the world where children are born into extreme and eternally-trapping poverty, even slavery, with dirty water and gleaned garbage as the best of their banquets. No clothing except recycled rags, a dirt or dirty concrete floor and maybe a roof forms their nursery. Instead of soothing lullabies their sleep is punctuated with the sounds of bombs, the rattle of gunfire, doors being kicked in to the accompaniment of much shouting, the screaming of relatives being dragged off to only God knows where. Sometimes death comes swiftly and horrifically to these infants, more often it is lingering and painful.

The world into which Mary's and Elizabeth's babies would be born was not a whole lot different. No sounds of gunfire in those days, instead the clanking of swords and metal armour, but it was still a difficult place to raise a baby successfully to adulthood. And yet for all of those challenges both of these women were filled with joy at the prospect of having a baby, and especially at the clear indication of the hand of God at work in these births. Mary is so filled with joy she cannot contain it, and she bursts into song.

This is not the first time in the history of God's actions that a woman has burst into song like Mary. Indeed, Mary's words closely echo those of Hanna. You might remember Hanna was the woman who hid in the temple after closing time to pray that she might get pregnant, and the priest Eli thought she was drunk and went to throw her out, but when Hanna offered her son to God if she should be blessed by God with a son, he pronounced that she would indeed have such a son, and that son we know as Samuel. Other such incidents come to mind, such as Abraham and Sarah, and their son Isaac, as well as Manoah and his wife, and their son Samson.

Following on those traditions in which elderly couples were blessed by God with a first child we would expect Elizabeth to be the one to burst forth in song, as she fit that same profile. Even her son fits the profile, for her son John (the Baptist) would also become a key prophetic figure. Sarah laughed, and named her son 'Laughter (Isaac)'; Hanna sang, and we might well expect Elizabeth to sing also.

The surprise, however, is that it is Mary, a young virgin, who sings, and as she does she signals that God is doing something new. God's grace here is new, and surprising, and beyond understanding. He is not acting here with a minor change in the aged and barren, He is acting in a totally new and mysterious way, restarting His grace anew and afresh in the birth of this child.

And Mary's song itself is a surprise. She sings of justice, which in and of itself is not so surprising; however she sings of justice in the past tense, as having already happened. We might expect her to sing of justice to come, but she declares God as already having acted, having shown strength, scattered the proud, brought down the powerful, lifted the lowly, filled the hungry, and sent the rich away empty. We may be surprised, but for Mary it's not confusing; she is singing a declaration of faith, that God has acted, and in that starting to act lies the promise of fulfilling those actions.

We continue to proclaim Mary's song. We affirm a new beginning of God's justice in a new covenant in the birth of Jesus, a justice affirmed in all the ministry of Jesus, a covenant sealed in his death and resurrection. Jesus himself declared in later life to the baby who jumped in Elizabeth's womb, to John the Baptist, that this justice was beginning to be fulfilled, as the hungry were fed, the naked were clothed, the oppressed were freed. Jesus also declared in his death and resurrection that the promise of full justice to come was sealed, that upon his return in glory the lowly would be lifted, the proud made humble. New life times 2 – first with Jesus' birth – and then new life in us through him.

“But what about in the meantime?”, you ask. It is true that in the meantime, while the process of bringing about justice is incomplete, there are still the proud, even among those who would label themselves with the name of Christ. There are still the rich and powerful, keeping others poor and oppressed through weapons of war, weapons of economic power and greed, weapons of prejudice and hatred. There are still the hungry, the poor, the downtrodden, the oppressed, the powerless.

But there are also those who, filled with the Spirit as Elizabeth was, and as Mary was, who are also engaged, silently and sometimes not-so-silently, in God’s act of bringing justice to the world. There are people who stand in the cold feeling embarrassed as they jingle bells to raise money to feed and clothe the hungry and the naked. There are many who sling boxes of food and bags of wheat and rice, who work long hours at low or no pay to put together food hampers. There are uncounted legions who cook, who serve, who visit, who stop to chat, who bathe and bandage, who listen, who care. There are the untold faithful who contribute financially with their offerings and gifts to help all of this happen.

When you stop to realize just how many dedicated and faithful people there are who are acting out God’s bringing justice to this world, it is enough to put a song in your heart. A song just like Mary’s, echoing her declaration that “the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” A song in your heart just begging to burst forth in excitement not only at what God has done, but what God promises to do in the future.

Let it. Burst forth, that is. Let the song that God has created in your heart with his new grace, his old mercy, his timeless love burst forth. Hum Christmas carols on the sidewalks; sing Noel in the shower; tap your toes to the songs on the radio, on TV, in the malls. Let the joy at new life from God burst forth in this Christmas season with songs in your heart proclaiming God acting, God with us and among us in a new way, signaled by the birth of the baby named Jesus, the son of Mary, the Son of God, our saviour, God with us, Immanuel, the Christ, our Lord Jesus.