



SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection - Luke 1:39-45 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v.39) In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, (v.40) where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. (v.41) When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit (v.42) and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. (v.43) And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? (v.44) For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. (v.45) And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Today we celebrate the second Sunday of Advent, a time of hope and anticipation, as we await the birth of the Christ child. Historically seen as a time of preparation but also a time of penitence, we review our lives and look ahead to Jesus' birth and the joys and challenges it brings. Advent is a time of journeying with all of the faithful to renewed life in Christ. It is also a time of celebration of God's first breaking into human history and a reminder of his promise to come again. We recognize in the revelation of God in Jesus that all of creation is reconciled to God. As we wait in joyful expectation, we also pay heed to our own responsibility in helping to bring about a more just and peaceful world. As African Americans especially, we acknowledge as his mother did that Jesus has come to restore the balance of the world so that it leans towards justice and away from evil. Jesus is the one who righted the wrongs of humanity and blessed us with hope for a better day.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Luke 1:39-45

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

This text has always been special for me, as has all of the Lucan Infancy Narrative. As a young African American girl, I grew up hearing this story told by my mother and wondering at the miracle of Jesus' birth. However, as I grew older and began to explore the challenges of being a black woman in the United States, I became more critical. How did Mary, a young woman in her teens, embarking on a new life as an engaged woman, cope with this massive shift in her circumstances? How do you respond to God's call in the face of others' questions, doubt, anger, and denial? Responding to that question in my own life when I was called from the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church into the Roman Catholic Church and from the life of an attorney to that of a theologian, I realized that the source for my decision was my faith in God and God's call and that the same was true for Mary.

The birth of a child is usually a time for celebration, but there have been and continue to be times when such a birth can be troubling because of the situation into which the child is being born: poverty, famine, war, disease and, increasingly, rape used as a weapon of war. How do we reflect on the birth of a child in these horrific contexts? We celebrate the miracle of life while acknowledging the problems that may accompany the child's birth and work as a community of faith to help both child and parents cope with the issues impacting them. It is not a time for condemnation, although many young, pregnant and unwed mothers do face such condemnation. It is rather a time for faith and the hope that this newborn may excel to heights unimagined just as both the son of Mary, an insignificant young unwed (but betrothed) Galilean woman, and the son of her cousin, Elizabeth, did. Both sought the best for their child; both had been warned of the consequences of their faith in God's call; both brought forth life in the face of disbelief, anger, questions, and doubt. Yet, one grew up to prepare the path of God while his cousin was acknowledged as the Son of God.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Luke's Gospel is a study of God's grace appearing in human form to bring salvation to the entire world, most especially those historically marginalized, oppressed and made invisible. Jesus

reveals a deep compassion and mercy in his ministry to the least among us. Few African American scholars have written on the Advent season, and none on these verses, despite the importance that the baby Jesus has played in the songs and prayers of the enslaved and their descendants. There is greater emphasis on the man Jesus and his liberatory message than on the helpless infant. However, many womanist theologians see in these few lines the story of black women, slave and free.

The meeting of Mary and Elizabeth is the meeting of two women, usually left out of the historical narrative, who recognize and affirm the working of the Holy Spirit in their midst. Women were unimportant in the world of the Ancient Near East except in their capacities as wives and mothers. Mary and Elizabeth broke open the expectations of their time by their faith that was not blind or simple but profound. They are very much aware of what has been asked of them and of the difficulties they and their sons will encounter in life, but they give a yes to God that breaks open human history. They exemplify in many ways the bold and daring enslaved women who, despite the dangers, gave birth to children whom they prayed would have a better and freer life than they had. Mary “is not merely the domestic mother; she is also a paradigm for the socially concerned female. Luke/Acts displays, in a way disproportionate to the other gospels, a prominent interest in the witness made by women.”¹

These brief lines are encompassed by the much bigger stories of the announcement of God’s grace poured over a poor country woman and Mary’s subsequent manifesto of God’s justice as it will be brought to life in her son, Jesus. She travels to her cousin in hope, fear and confusion but also in great anticipation. That Luke has Elizabeth proclaim not once but twice that both Mary and her child are blessed is of critical importance; for, by putting these words in a woman’s mouth, Luke raises her from anonymity and signals the forthcoming ordeal of both John and Jesus. Elizabeth is given the role of prophet and comforter, helping Mary to recognize and accept the momentousness of her earlier encounter with the Angel Gabriel and preparing her for her difficult future. It is Elizabeth’s greeting that enables Mary to proclaim her song of joy, a song that also, however, defines her son’s significance as one who will bring justice for those oppressed and failure for those who are oppressors.

The African slaves were paradoxical in their encounter with Sacred Scripture. Handed interpretations adapted by slave masters to force them to accept their harsh lives as God’s will, they rejected these distorted Biblical readings and interpreted the Bible for themselves, opening the door to readings that liberated and inspired them and gave them the strength to persevere. They recognized in both Testaments a God who was on their side. This simple story of a baby whose legitimacy was questioned, whose parentage was unclear and whose mother was young and unwed was very familiar to the slaves of yesteryear and is familiar to blacks today.

Mary not only breaks open human history but also subverts it, turning all of reality upside down, for she affirms and acknowledges that the miraculous work of God in her brought about through the Holy Spirit will result in a new reality for all of humanity. She stands, therefore, as a symbol of hope and courage for so many marginalized women who, by their actions throughout history and their willingness to stand up and act on faith, bring about a new and better world for all of humanity. They and their children serve as catalysts for change in the world and for hope beyond it. Mary, therefore, is a sign of contradiction, and a model for bold, daring, audacious and

courageous black women. She is a source of hope for young pregnant girls the children giving birth to children. In her they can see the possibilities that exist in what would otherwise seem a hopeless situation.

Celebration

God enters our lives in unexpected ways, changing our course and bringing us to places unforeseen. God enables us to do the unimaginable; to bring life from a dry womb and a young woman who has never “known” a man. God challenges us to believe regardless. During the season of Advent, we celebrate our belief by looking ahead to the birth of that child who gave us life and enables us to love fully and without fear.

Descriptive Details

Mary’s excitement and fears at this unexpected pregnancy are matched by those of her older and formerly barren cousin, yet both, through faith, overcome their fears. Expectation, anticipation, doubt, urgency, some self-doubt, but also joy, wonder, persistence, perseverance, and blessing are all a part of this season. The following details may also be helpful:

Sights: See Mary going with haste to a Judean town in the hills; see her enter the house of Zechariah and greet Elizabeth; see the child leap in Elizabeth’s womb;

Sounds: Hear Mary’s greeting to Elizabeth; hear Elizabeth’s loud exclamation to Mary; and

Smells: Smell the hill country.

III. Further Reading

1. Blount, Brian B., General ed. True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007.
2. Callahan, Allen Dwight. The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006.
3. Cannon, Katie G. “Womanist Interpretation and Preaching in the Black Church.” Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction. Vol.1. New York, NY: Crossroad, 1993. pp. 326-337.
4. Davis, Valerie Bridgeman, and Safiyah Fosua, Eds. The Africana Worship Book, Year A and Year B. Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2006, 2007.
5. Johnson, Elizabeth. Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints. New York, NY: Continuum, 2006.

Notes

1. Felder, Cain Hope. Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989. p. 143.