

Date Preached	19-Dec-2021	Date Initiated	07-Dec-2021
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Advent 4, Year C

"When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting ... Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit"



It was so long ago now: That evil tyrant Herod killed my beloved son John—you know him as "the Baptist"—when he was thirty-three or thirty-four, and this all happened when I was pregnant with him. But I still remember that day like it was a week ago.

Mary was coming for a visit—my dear cousin Mary. I hadn't seen her in seven or eight years ... not since she was a little girl. By now, I knew, she'd be pretty much grown up. She'd sent word of her coming by way of some traveling merchants, but with the roads being so bad ... and the winter weather making them worse ... I had *no* idea when to expect her. I awoke each morning thinking, "Maybe today's the day," and night-after-night, I went to bed disappointed.

But longing for Mary's arrival was far from my only heartache, for I was painfully lonely—lonely and forsaken. You see, I was something of an outcast in the community. No matter that my husband was a priest, and I myself a descendant of Moses' brother Aaron (Lk 1:5). No matter that we observed all the Torah laws, kept every Sabbath and celebrated every holy day. No. The only thing others knew (or *needed* to know) about me was that I had never been able to have a child. It was, for them, a mark of my disgrace ... a sign of some sin; of God's intentionally distancing Godself from me.* And although I had—miraculously—become pregnant some months before, I'd confined myself to the house (1:24), choosing to tell no one until I was sure the pregnancy would endure.

To make matters worse, I'd been more or less deprived of my husband Zechariah's company for months now. He hadn't been able to speak since the time our son John was conceived. In fact, he wouldn't utter a single word until after a week after little John's birth (1:64).

So there I was: a woman who should've had every reason to rejoice at the good fortune of my pregnancy ... to glory in my 'vindication' in the eyes of my judgmental neighbors ... to celebrate the coming of our precious child with my husband. And yet, there I sat ... alone, rejected and muted ... in a house that seemed more prison than home.

To keep my mind off the rejection and isolation that filled my life, I guess, I positively *threw* myself into preparing for Mary's visit. On top of all the *normal* daily chores—all the cooking and washing and mending and milking—I swept, and I scrubbed, and I straightened, over and over again, day after day. Each day, I got out our special dishes and wiped them all down again, even though the dust hadn't had any time to settle on them since the day before. I made up a bed for Mary to sleep on, and each day, I dragged it to a different spot, to see whether she might be more comfortable there. I sewed her a dress ... and then a shawl ... and then a kerchief; and when I ran out of cloth, I strung her pretty little necklaces using little bits and things I found lying around the house and yard. And the cooking! Every day I baked more bread and ground up another handful of

* This was, in fact, the prevailing social attitude concerning women who were not able to bear children at the time; and, indeed, for many centuries to follow, in the absence of a biological understanding of conception and gestation.

barley to make special cakes for Mary, *whenever* she'd arrive. Oh, yes, I *knew* I was overdoing it, of course, and while Zechariah couldn't say anything, the worry in his eyes made it plain: I was in something of a frenzy ... acting as if Mary's arrival somehow depended upon my own endless, ragged effort; as if my preparations of house and hospitality were the measure of my love.

And then, Mary finally arrived—oh, that glorious day! And in an instant—in the twinkling of an eye—joy and love and welcome displaced my weeks of frenetic preparation, for Mary's true destination had not been my home, but my *heart*. Through the door that day walked not my cousin, but the very bearer of my Savior, the Messiah: riding not in pomp and glory, but in a swollen belly; borne not on clouds descending, but by a tiny, tired teenaged girl.

My soul knew it before senses, as little John, still in my womb, leapt to hear the Good News Mary spoke in her greeting. My spirit grasped it before my mind, as words of blessing and honor ... at the perception of Grace Itself ... came pouring out of my mouth, the product of no conscious thought. My body embraced it before my head, as my arms enfolded the Presence of God Among Us—in our very midst—in the form of a no-body little woman from a no-where little town on a no-time little day.

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I've spent years, now, treasuring the memory of those precious first few moments with Mary. And I've thought about what I may have done differently if I'd known in advance that Cousin Mary's arrival was actually the first leg of her blessed Child's journey to the Manger. Had I known, I wouldn't have made any elaborate preparations or worn myself down to a nubbin trying to make things perfect, for what Mary brought me that day was Perfection. I'd have paid no mind to the tut-tutters and tsk-tskers who thought me lazy or pinched or grim because I didn't create overwhelming lists and spend every penny trying to construct His Arrival; for what Mary brought me that day was *Completeness*.

When Mary walked through my door, I witnessed the birth of God's Own Nativity ... and all I could be was *still*. I put down the work that occupied my hands ... erased the endless loop of chores from my mind ... decided that whatever I had already managed to get done was fully worthy of Him ... and I just opened my heart: in longing for His Coming; in expectancy of His Arrival; in prayer for His Presence to fill me. For I cannot create for the Great Creator anything He hadn't already made, except the desire that He abide in me, and I in Him. And I cannot give the Great Giver anything He hadn't already given me, except a heart to call His Own.



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