

Micah 5:2-5
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-45

Our gospel reading today features two pregnant ladies. Well, no: it features two *miraculously* pregnant ladies. And while they could have been comparing notes on morning sickness and aching backs and swollen feet, Elizabeth and Mary are instead prophesying by the inspiration of God's Spirit.

Elizabeth is the older of the two – they are distant relatives – and she's farther along in her pregnancy at about six months. She is married to a priest, Zechariah, who hails from a long line of priests. Actually, so does Elizabeth. They both had sterling religious pedigrees but that's not what sets this couple apart. It was how they lived their lives. Gospel-writer Luke says, "Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments of God." In one of those bitter ironies of life, they were also childless. Childlessness was considered a disgrace in Israel but here they were: righteous, faithful followers of Yahweh.

But the angel Gabriel appears to Zechariah while in the midst of his sacred priestly duties and the angel has a lot to say. I'll just give you the high points: "You and your wife will have a son; you will name him John. You will be filled with joy, so will many others. John will be great before the Lord. John will be filled with God's Spirit even before he's born. He will turn many people to God. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children. And he will do all this in the spirit and power of one of Israel's greatest prophets: Elijah."

Wow! That is one breath-stopping heck of a promise. And yet, in spite of how extraordinary, wonderful and splendid it was, Zechariah probably heard very little after, "You will have a son." This childless couple – well past the age of baby-making – are gifted with a miraculous conception.

In another part of town, six months later, the angel Gabriel makes a second announcement. This time to Mary. She, too, will become pregnant by the working of God's Spirit. Only in her case, no husband will be involved.

Two miraculous pregnancies; two women who meet up with each other in our gospel reading today.

It is Elizabeth we hear from first. Her reaction to Mary is so intense that the Bible uses a redundancy to describe it. She doesn't just *exclaim* a greeting; she does so with a *loud shout*. "Blessed are you," she shouts. "And blessed is the baby that you carry."

She didn't know Mary was pregnant. Mary had just found out herself and besides, she was a very proper, *unmarried* young lady. But Elizabeth knew she was pregnant. Because Elizabeth was in touch with a source from beyond our typical realm of functioning. A supernatural source. A source of such pure love that it permeates all of existence, giving life generously even to something as dead as the womb of an elderly woman.

This source we know as God – a love that yearns intensely to be one with us. So much so as to become one of us and live among us.

Elizabeth isn't quite done exclaiming. She ponders in that way of spiritual wonder that catches all of us from time to time – a moment of rapture, perhaps? Or of ecstasy? She wonders why the mother of her Lord – Elizabeth's Lord – has come to her. She has perceived that not only is Mary pregnant but what Mary will bear will make God's love so real and so personal that it – LOVE – will become the only thing worth being called "Lord."

"Why has it happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" After blessing Mary and her baby, Elizabeth returns to bless once more saying in conclusion: "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken by God."

Isn't that what Christmas is about for those of us who observe it from the perspective of Church rather than from secular society? It's a blessing. It is a yearly reminder that we are blessed when we believe in love. "Blessed are you who believe that God will fulfill what God has promised: an eventual outcome of love."that LOVE will be our Lord.that nothing anyone ever does or says or thinks will come from anything but love. The lion will lie down with the lamb. The child will put its hand on the adder's den. And nothing will hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, promises the Lord: for the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.

That is a big promise. We are blessed if we believe it. But it's hard to believe. It is hard to believe in love when our world is so divided by hate. But Jesus said to pray for our enemies. What this means effectively is "love what you hate."

We hate bigotry. But we must stop short of hating the bigot; the racist; the ones who are intolerant of and indignant towards others. The ones who engage in hate crimes. These are the ones we must love. It sounds absurd, I know, but it is the reason for Christmas. We hate war. But not the soldier, or the generals, or even those who finance war. These are the ones for whom we must foster love in our hearts. We hate injustice: when the poor are prevented from climbing out of poverty because they can't earn decent wages, pay for health care, and are disproportionately more present in our nation's prisons than the rest of us. Blessed are we if we can believe that even injustice will one day be conquered by love.

That's why Mary had a little lamb. Jesus. He is the one who animates love, embodies it and makes it available for us. He is God's love. We are blessed when we believe in love and that it will ultimately prevail over hate.

Amen.