

**4 Advent – Year C – December 20, 2009**  
**Micah 5:2-5a; Canticle 15 (Luke 1:46-55); Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45**  
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The song says it all, “just breathe.” Many a pregnant woman has heard similar words from well-meaning attendants when it comes time to deliver her child. I expect that many women have also had a moment of deep annoyance at such well intentioned advice, along the lines of, okay buddy if that’s all there is too it, go ahead, you give birth! Yet these two simply words have a great deal of significance for us as we celebrate the fourth and last Sunday of Advent today. I had a shocking moment this past week, when I realized that I’ve been enjoying Advent so much, that I was not even remotely ready for Christmas. That is, at least in accord with social norms and expectations. It took my breath away: many of our Christmas cards were not written, I had not purchased a single gift, and I suddenly felt the swift kick of fear, and the lingering ache of guilt. Doubts filled my heart. The inevitable questions raced each other around my head: why are you feeling guilty? Is it even worth trying to buck the system? How on earth am I going to find the time to go shopping when I have five sermons to write this week? You know, just the usual things that keep us up at night! The indoctrinated habits of a lifetime are very, very, hard to break. Just breathe; I wanted to hear God say. I heard nothing but clamoring panic, and then I cried. I, for one, desire the simplicity of living for Christ, and the freedom that it brings. I yearn to experience the joy of Jesus’ incarnation, without the guilt. Perhaps most of all, I pray for God’s gift of peace to fill every heart with a knowledge and love of Christ in this sad and hasty world. Isn’t that what we all pray for? Perhaps not.

In *these days*, we set out with haste to the stores, because there are only five shopping days left to Christmas. “In *those days* Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country.” She was smart to get away and find the one person in the world who probably understood her with absolute clarity and compassion. She was also taking a breather from the consequences of being an unmarried, pregnant teenager in a small town. She needed to find comfort, strength, and confirmation of God’s embarrassing challenge to her faithful and well-ordered life. No doubt, Elizabeth was feeling much the same way. Long past childbearing age, she has suddenly and quite unexpectedly found herself pregnant, and swiftly withdrawn from her usual activities, putting herself into five months of exile. Two quite insignificant, marginalized women, whose lives were largely governed by the daily struggles of living in poverty. Two pregnant women, who both have to bear months of curious glances, scowls of disapproval, or even the echoes of secret laughter, because of God’s miraculous intervention in their lives. To a world of judgment without barely an ounce of God’s grace and mercy, their circumstances are cause for disapproval, contempt, or some kind of bogus sympathy, for so obviously breaking the world’s rules.

Today, however, is a good day to break the rules, **and** just breathe. Mary’s consent to God’s will that she be *theotokos*, God bearer, is a glimpse of how she will personally embody God’s desire for all of creation, as we hear in the Song of Mary. The humble and lowly are lifted up, and the proud are scattered in their conceit in God’s economy of salvation. As we await Elizabeth’s response to Mary’s tentative knock at the door, let’s take a moment to reflect on what is going on here. Mary’s response to God at the astonishing news brought to her by the angel Gabriel is the model of perfect humility and obedience. In her deep faith, Mary seems to understand how God’s power and greatness are manifest in goodness, grace and mercy. In accepting the call to bear God’s son, we realize that God is working in a deeply personal way with Mary, yet with world altering consequences. Similarly, for her relative Elizabeth, and her inconceivable pregnancy. These two women, one from inconsequential Nazareth in Galilee, and the other from the backwaters of the Judean hill country, are nonetheless bearers of the messenger, and the message. Notably, God has avoided choosing anyone even remotely associated with the corrupt centers of power in Jerusalem to bring to birth the Savior of the whole world.

Once again, in a reversal of social convention that beautifully reflects God's character, as soon as she hears Mary's greeting, Elizabeth honors her visitor, the much younger woman, with words of blessing. We are told that the first witness to our unborn Lord and Savior is actually Elizabeth's unborn baby John, who leaps for joy at the sound of Mary's voice. Fulfilling prophecy John is already full of the Holy Spirit before he is even born. The Holy Spirit imparts God's word, and prepares God's children to hear and receive it. Elizabeth in turn is filled with the Holy Spirit, and her response is to bless Mary, and to acknowledge that the unborn child Mary carries is also her Lord. Although Elizabeth is approaching the third trimester of her pregnancy, there is no reason for her to have known that Mary was pregnant, and yet she does. She confirms and blesses Mary's faith and belief in God's steadfast covenantal faithfulness in fulfilling His promise to her, and the promise of salvation for the sake of the world. God's promise is found as early in Scripture as Leviticus 26:12, which reads, "And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people." As we have seen over the last few weeks, the prophets spoke of God's promised salvation. In this simple exchange, God gives Mary and Elizabeth much needed community, and confirms the connection that links them and their unborn children through time and eternity.

We might start to think that the story of Mary and Elizabeth is not that important in the bigger scheme of things. After all, John is honored by Jesus as a mighty prophet, and Jesus' life is the big news event. We might believe that these two women were singled out for God's favor because they had the kind of faith or righteousness that we could never aspire to. If we are to make anything of this, we need to take our own deep breath and ask God to enlighten our hearts and minds. It takes great courage to be so countercultural as to sit back, listen, and wait, especially as the countdown clock is a constant reminder that the endgame is imminent. Imminent, but not yet, because today we have to sit awhile with Mary and Elizabeth before we can move to the questions of exactly what or who is imminent here? What or who is the focus of our priorities and our weeks of preparation? What could we possibly have in common with Mary and Elizabeth?

If we have been paying attention to all that we have heard and shared through Advent, and then we know that each of us is pregnant with possibility. We too can feel the brush of God's hand touching us deeply, taking hold of our lives. You and I can know that with our consent there is something of infinite importance growing inside us in the gift of faith, and in our transformed lives. We share the common experience of the occasional kick of the Holy Spirit as she redirects our pathetically short attention span back to what is of lasting worth and value in our growing relationships with Christ Jesus our Lord, and with one another. There is also one more thing. At the beginning of Advent, we talked about the task of rearranging the furniture in our hearts to make room for the Christ child to be born again in us. The gift that Mary offers God is loving nurture, inner space, and belief. She gave God time to grow inside her. There is no time, except God's time, and no purpose of significance, except God's purpose for our lives. How is God's presence within you and me speaking to us today? According to chaplain, Loretta Ross-Gotta, "What matters in the deeper experience of contemplation ... is relationship, the being with. We create holy ground and give birth to Christ in our time not by doing, but by believing and by loving the mysterious Infinite One who stirs within. This requires trust that something of great and saving importance is growing and kicking its heels in [us]." Will we respond to God's gift of grace as Mary does, with humility, and a lasting song celebrating God's greatness? Or will our response be something else entirely? It's time to deliver the Good News to the world. Just breathe.

Amen.