

**Homily for the 4th Sunday of Advent – Cycle C
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois
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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

With all the noisy parties, large crowds, and busy stores during the weeks leading up to Christmas, December may be considered more of a time for extroverted persons. On the other hand, introverted personalities may consider Advent to be a time for waiting until Christmas Eve, when they can experience a “Silent Night”! In the Gospel today (*Luke 1:39-45*), we meet two women who are role models if you need to step away from the crowd. They show us that God is with us when His promises are unexpectedly fulfilled.

Today’s Gospel from Saint Luke is traditionally designated simply as “The Visitation.” It describes the visit Mary made upon finding out that Elizabeth’s barrenness has been removed and she is now pregnant. This story brings together the unexpected objects of the angel Gabriel’s annunciation to Zechariah and then to Mary. Part of the announcement the angel Gabriel made to Mary regarding her future motherhood included the information that her relative Elizabeth, who for years had been barren, was

now six months pregnant. Immediately upon entering Elizabeth's house and giving her a greeting, a strange response takes place. The infant in Elizabeth's womb leaped. What happened was that John the Baptist paid homage to Jesus even before either of them was actually born. That is the purpose for which John will be born.

Upon encountering Mary and experiencing the unborn John leaping in her womb, Elizabeth is immediately filled with the Holy Spirit. This will be the source for Elizabeth's insights into who Mary really is and why she has come to make this visit. Through the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth declares that Mary is the most blessed among women and blessed also is the fruit of her womb. These are, in effect, prophetic oracles coming from Elizabeth and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Mary's visit enables Elizabeth to pronounce Mary most blessed among all women. It also gives Elizabeth the occasion to proclaim Mary blessed because she has believed what the angel Gabriel told her. In effect, this will also make Mary the first disciple. The Visitation brings together all the important events that will lead up to the birth of the Messiah. The Holy Spirit is behind all the miraculous moments described here. Both of these infants now in their mothers' wombs will eventually fulfill their divine missions.

Saint Ambrose provides an insightful commentary on the line in this Gospel that refers to when *“Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit.”* He says:

Notice the contrast and the choice of words. Elizabeth is the first to hear Mary’s voice, but John is the first to be aware of grace. She hears with the ears of the body, but he leaps for joy at the meaning of the mystery. She is aware of Mary’s presence, but he is aware of the Lord’s: a woman aware of a woman’s presence, the forerunner aware of the pledge of our salvation. The women speak of the grace they have received while the children are active in secret, unfolding the mystery of love with the help of their mothers, who prophesy by the spirit of their sons.

Commenting on the line when Elizabeth says to Mary, *“Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled,”* Saint Ambrose then speaks to us:

You also are blessed because you have heard and believed. A soul that believes both conceives and brings forth the Word of God and acknowledges his works. Let Mary’s soul be in each of you to proclaim the greatness of the Lord. Let her spirit be in each to rejoice in the Lord. Christ has only one mother in the flesh, but we all bring forth Christ in faith.¹

Whether your home is quiet and still or noisy and chaotic, Mary and Elizabeth give us an example of three things we need. They are the belief that God will fulfill his promises, a joy from within, and a friend to accompany us on the journey.

Mary believes that God will accomplish His promises. She and Elizabeth prioritize what God wants and make God's concerns their own. Whatever they had planned to do is now off. Their first thoughts are about God.

This decision leads to the second gift they deliver – a reservoir of joy. Last week, we celebrated *Gaudete* Sunday, a Latin word which means “rejoice.” We are called to a change of heart that will lead us to rejoice at the coming of Our Savior. Joy does not come from external praise from others. For Mary and Elizabeth, joy comes from within their bodies, connecting outwardly to others. Joy is an answered prayer to a senior adult couple (Luke 1:15) and a baby kicking and leaping inside a mother's womb. God has planted that joy in you. This joy is a shared satisfaction that the things you hoped for are coming true and that others share in your success and favor. Like the angels and shepherds, we rejoice in what God accomplishes.

To find that joy, we connect with the community of faith, friends who accompany us on our spiritual journey. Elizabeth provides Mary with a mentor and fellow traveler. She knows the road ahead for the expectant mother of the Lord. An Advent withdrawal does not mean isolation; the Holy Spirit creates a community to support one another.

As the Word of God entered into Mary at the Incarnation, may we also say yes to God's presence in us through the Eucharist and be God's messenger of joy to the world.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ From a commentary on Luke by Saint Ambrose, bishop (Lib 2, 19.22-23, 26-27: CCL 14, 39-42), quoted in the Office of Readings for December 21.