

Lectionary Reflection
4th Sunday of Advent — December 19, 2021
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Luke 1:39-45 (46-55), Advent 4C

My husband and I met some of our best friends, Nancy and Mark, in our hospital's birthing class for first-time expectant parents. When we realized we were the oldest couples in the class, we gravitated to each other. Nancy and I laughed together about the hospital's label of us being of "advanced maternal age" at 35. Dan and Mark exchanged uncomfortable glances when the birthing videos were shown; the featured screaming, all-natural woman from the 1960s convinced Dan he needed to stand by my head and convinced me that an epidural was a gift from God.

Our babies were born days apart. Nancy and I continued to meet after the class to commiserate over the joys and struggles of mothering newborn infants. What I appreciated most about our friendship was that we could be straight-up honest with each other about how hard it was and how tired we were without fear of judgement. Pregnancy and parenting are full of blessings. But not every moment is magical. My friendship with Nancy was a much-needed help and support.

I remembered this gift of friendship while reading about Mary's haste to see Elizabeth after the angel's visit announcing Jesus' birth. Some critics disagree with the interpretation that Mary rushed to Elizabeth because she needed some sort of confirmation that what she had heard from the angel was true, that Mary didn't just immediately believe. But why can't we allow Mary a human moment? Maybe she just needed a female friend, another mother-to-be who could understand and encourage her. Babies turn your world upside down even when they're not the Savior of the world.

This passage connects John the Baptist to Jesus: John leaps in Elizabeth's womb in response to Mary's greeting. But I'm drawn to the blessing these two women are to each other — two marginalized, pregnant women; one young, poor and unwed, the other of advanced maternal age. God gives Mary and Elizabeth what each most needs in this vulnerable moment — the gift of each other.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent we might pause to consider the needs of those who come to worship. Who comes to church on the Sunday before Christmas? Who comes to church on Sunday when they'll be back on Friday for Christmas Eve? Were they asked to light the Advent candles? Or help with the Christmas pageant? Or do they come in search of something more? A blessing from God? An encouraging word? People they can be real with without fear of judgement? You don't have to be an expectant mother to understand these human needs. Elizabeth and Mary remind us how we can be here for each other, how God doesn't just turn our lives upside down and then leave us all alone.

"Blessed are you among women," Elizabeth says to Mary. Blessed are we who gather with these women to be here for each other and to give God thanks and praise.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What feelings arise in you as you read this passage?
2. Picture the people you anticipate being in the pews this Sunday. Why do you imagine they are there? What needs do you imagine they bring with them?
3. As we continue our Advent waiting for the birth of Christ, how can we be here for each other? What human needs can we meet together in community?