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# The Prophets Among Us

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A Sermon By

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The Fourth Sunday of Advent  
December 20, 2015

Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon is available at*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/2015-12-20-MA.mp3>.

## **The Gifts of Mary and Elizabeth**

Luke 1:39-55

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I wonder if you have ever thought about what a gift it is to be a member of a church called... Grace. It is a name I have found this community lives into, and it has been a great gift to me to be with you. I want to thank you for your most gracious welcome of me, and I look forward to serving with you into the next year. I love having Grace as my church home.

My other church home is the new chapel at Virginia Seminary in Alexandria, where I am studying this year, and where we have services three times a day. (I confess I do not go to all of them.) As part of the consecration of our chapel, a beautiful statue has been installed in its courtyard. It is of Mary and Elizabeth, encountering each other as in today's Gospel story. Both are pregnant, Elizabeth further along than Mary. Their features are African. Elizabeth has her hand on Mary's arm, and the artist seems to capture her in the midst of her joyous cry: "And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" Mary is standing straight, as if she is amazed at what Elizabeth is saying to her. She is taking it in. It is a beautiful statue; you must come see it.

Now today's Gospel passage opens a little before this moment, with Mary going "with haste" to Elizabeth, who we understand to be a kinswoman of hers. To back up a bit, Mary had just received the staggering news from an angel that she was to bear a child. Furthermore, she had heard: "that this son will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David and that he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Wow. So Mary is first "perplexed," for she is a virgin—she is no doubt an innocent young woman, but she knows a thing or two about a thing or two. The angel explains that the Holy Spirit will make all this possible, and the child will be holy. And Mary answers the angel, very calmly: "Here I am, a servant of the

Lord. Let it be according to your word.” There is no reason to doubt that Mary meant that, in utter humility and sincerity.

But after the angel departed, Mary must have had to sit down for a spell. We can only assume that she then said to herself, “wait, WHAT?!?” And so she packed her things and made the four-day journey to Elizabeth’s home.

This scene is common in European art and it is usually called “The Visitation.” In fact, I took a picture of the statue and posted it on my Facebook page, calling it “The Visitation.” I already knew I was going to preach this Sunday, and I was delighted that it brought to life the text I would be speaking to.

But it turns out that the statue is not called “The Visitation.” The artist named it, “Mary, the Prophet.” When I learned this, I did my own, smaller, “wait—what?!” And while I couldn’t really take in why, I realized that this was an invitation to engage in this text through that image of Mary as prophet.

I understand from Rev. Andrew that the artist, Peggy Parker, has visited Grace. If you have met her, you know what a lovely and thoughtful person she is, and how her art is her prayer and praise and her way of sharing the good news of God. So after my smaller “wait—what?” moment, I went not to Elizabeth, but to Peggy—I wanted to hear about her vision for this beautiful work.

First we talked about the prophets. One reason we don’t often think of Mary as a prophet is that she is a woman. But there are women prophets in the Bible: Rebekah, Miriam, Hannah, Judith and Anna among them. In the Old Testament, prophets always respond to their call by protesting their inadequacy. Jeremiah said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” Moses said, “Lord, I am not a very good public speaker. Here am I, send Aaron.” Mary had done this too. She said: “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” Fortunately for us, God never pays attention to these objections. Nowhere in the Bible does God ever say, “You’re right. There’s probably someone with a better resume than yours. I’ll keep looking.” But usually God *does* say, “Do not be afraid.” First, because God knows the prophet is up to the task. Second because God knows the prophet’s job is not to speak out of her own wisdom

or eloquence, but to be a messenger for God. And God will give the prophet the words and the strength she needs to do that.

Even so, of all the images of Mary, the prophet is not a common one. Quite frankly, Mary is frequently depicted as passive: sometimes as little more than a willing womb. But not this Mary. Here Mary sings the song we know as the Magnificat, a song of praise to God who turns the status quo upside down, who lifts up the humble like her, and chooses her, rather than a queen or princess, to be the bearer of the eternal Word. She foreshadows her son's prophetic ministry, a ministry that will do the same thing: scatter the proud, lift up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich away empty. This is the word of God that prophets had been delivering to God's people for centuries before Mary. She is the first prophet of the New Testament.

But I want to touch on the role given to Elizabeth in this passage, because I think she is actually the hinge in this Gospel story. So when Mary came to Elizabeth, her mind must have been racing. She was pregnant out of wedlock—a great risk for a woman in the Ancient Near East. She has had a visit from a celestial being. Although we have heard that Mary accepted God's word, she must still be processing it: believing perhaps, but not yet seeing. What I want you to notice is that Mary does not speak her prophecy until after Elizabeth speaks. And what does Elizabeth say to her? She says: “And blessed are you, who believe that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to you by the Lord.” She affirms Mary. She affirms her faith. She sees God working in Mary in a way that Mary is still struggling to comprehend. I think the statue captures Mary at this exact moment, just after Elizabeth has spoken to her. Then, and only then, does Mary's song BURST out of her.

I was thinking of Mary and Elizabeth the other day when I read about Malalla Yousafzai. She was speaking at a memorial for the 134 children killed in a Taliban attack on a Pakistani school a year ago. It must have been a most solemn occasion. Malalla is an 18-year-old Pakistani Muslim who has been speaking out for education for girls since she was 11. After the Taliban banned all girls' schooling, she began an anonymous blog about her struggles to get an education, and her message became so powerful that her enemies resolved to extinguish it.

When she was just 15, a member of the Taliban burst into a room where she was visiting with her friends and shot her in the head. They intended to kill her, but Malalla recovered. She is now the youngest Nobel Prize winner ever. Her message is more powerful than ever. The Taliban assassins did not know that they were dealing with someone whom the Holy One had chosen to deliver a message to the world. Mallala is a prophet. Mallala is Mary.

Malalla's father Ziauddin is the Elizabeth in this story. He grew up with five sisters, and he saw how they were ignored and discriminated against, even in his home. "In the morning, I was used to milk and cream," he said. "My sisters were given only tea." He made a different choice. He became a teacher, and he encouraged his daughter Malalla, who revealed herself to be bright--eager to go to school from an early age. When he was asked how he raised such an extraordinary daughter, Ziauddin said, "You should not ask me what I have done. Rather you ask me, what I did not do. I did not clip her wings to fly. I did not stop her from flying." He goes on to say, "Trust your daughters, they are faithful. Honor your daughters, they are honorable. And educate your daughters, they are amazing." That is what Elizabeth was telling Mary: I trust you. You are faithful. I honor you, for you are honorable. And you are amazing. And so Mary was. And so Malalla is.

In the most beautiful Psalm 139 is written, "Lord you have searched me out and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways." What a beautiful assurance that we are known and seen by God. And yet the Irish poet and philosopher John O'Donohue once wrote, "One of the deepest longings of the human soul is to be seen." I find this to be true. Despite the assurance that God knows us and loves us, we so often hide our light. We find it difficult to believe in our true giftedness from God.

Are we Mary? Or are we Elizabeth? The answer is, really, yes. There are seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, and prophecy is only one of them. We are called to recognize our own giftedness, so that it can be put to use for Christ in the world. But we are called also to bring forth the giftedness in others. We know people like this—the ones looking over their shoulders and saying, "who, me?" We may see how God is working in them more clearly than they are able.

And so we are the ones who say, yes! YOU. I ask you, then, to think of the people you know in whom you see a gift, and to remember to be like Ziauddin was to his daughter Mallala and Elizabeth was to her cousin Mary: “I see God working in you. I honor you. You are amazing.”

And then, watch what bursts forth. AMEN.