

Christmas Eve comes tomorrow. But today we're still in preparation mode. And our Gospel lesson today from Luke ch1 prepares us to hear the Christmas story tomorrow night from Luke ch2.

Chapters 1 & 2 of Luke are actually made up of 8 different scenes. 6 of these 8 scenes are about events that are enshrined on different days on the church calendar every year.

In reverse order, scene 8 tells the story of Jesus in the Temple when he was 12 years old.¹ This scene does not have a day on the calendar, but it is one of the Gospel readings when there's a second Sunday in the Christmas season.

Scene 7 tells of Mary and Joseph taking Jesus to the Temple when he was 40 days old.² And there in the Temple, 2 old prophets, Simeon and Anna, recognize the infant Jesus as the foretold Messiah, and they praise God. This heartwarming event is observed every year on February 2. It's not Groundhog Day. It is the Feast of the Presentation, exactly 40 days after Christmas every year.

Scenes 5 and 6 are the Gospel reading we'll hear tomorrow night on Christmas Eve.³ Scene 5 is the familiar Christmas story of Jesus being born in Bethlehem and laid in a manger. Scene 6 tells us of the appearance that night of God's army of angels to a group of frightened shepherds.

Scene 4 is the birth of John the Baptist. John is born 6 months before Jesus.⁴ And so his birthday is celebrated every year on June 24.

And there's a wonderful symbolism in the sky. The early church celebrated Christmas near the Winter Solstice. That puts John's Nativity near the Summer Solstice. So, after John's birth, the length of daytime gets shorter and shorter for the next 6 months. After Jesus' birth, the days get longer and longer. This is a wonderful reminder of what John the Baptist later says of Jesus, "He must increase, I must decrease."⁵ It also is a powerful symbolic reminder of something the Gospel of John proclaims: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness (does) not overcome it."⁶

Before John the Baptist's birth in Scene 4, we see an the first encounter between him and Jesus in Scene 3, which is our Gospel lesson today.⁷ We heard this morning of a visit from Jesus' mother Mary to her relative, John the Baptist's mother Elizabeth, while both Jesus and John are in utero. This event is commemorated every year on May 31, the Feast of the Visitation. I'll circle back to Scene 3 in a moment.

¹ Lk 2:41-51

² Lk 2:21-40

³ Lk 2:1-7 and 2:8-20

⁴ Lk 1:57-80

⁵ Jn 3:30

⁶ Jn 1:5

⁷ Lk 1:39-45 (& 46-56)

Scenes 1 and 2 are scenes of two different annunciations.⁸ In the first scene, the first annunciation, the Archangel Gabriel comes to John's father Zechariah to announce John's birth. Then 6 months later, Gabriel visits Mary in Nazareth. Scene 1 does not have a day on our calendar. But scene 2, the Annunciation to Mary is celebrated every year exactly 9 months before Christmas on March 25. It was also our Gospel reading last year on this Sunday.

A quick recap of these 2 scenes.

There's a wonderful contrast here. The Archangel Gabriel visits John's father, then Jesus' mother. But we have very different reactions.

John the Baptist's father is an old priest. His wife Elizabeth is old and post-menopausal. They have always longed for a child, but they've remained childless. So God sends Gabriel to the old priest Zechariah to say, basically: 'You are going to get exactly what you've wanted, exactly what you've prayed for. I'm going to give you your heart's desire.'

And the old priest says, 'Oh yeah? How can I be sure of this?' "How will I know that this is so?"⁹ 'What kind of sign will you give me?'

Duh. If your elderly post-menopausal wife becomes pregnant, that's a pretty clear sign in and of itself. And of course, an angel paying you a visit is a pretty impressive thing in and of itself.

The angel is not happy. He says, "I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was he (God himself) who sent me to bring you this good news!"¹⁰ 'So, you want a sign? Shut up. That's your sign. Don't ask any more questions for a while.' And Zechariah would be mute until his son was born.

The message is clear. A priest who gets good news that God is giving him exactly what he asks for should be thankful, not skeptical. And eventually, Zechariah is thankful in scene 4, but it takes him awhile to get there. In scene 1, he is skeptical.

Six months we have Scene 2. The same angel goes to a young teenage girl, maybe 13 or 14 years old. Gabriel says to Mary that she is going to become pregnant and give birth to a child.

When Gabriel shows up, Mary is scared and confused. When Gabriel says she's going to conceive and give birth to the Messiah, she does ask 'how?' She doesn't ask for a sign. But she is confused. She knows where babies come from, and this is highly unusual.

But when Gabriel says that God will take care of it, that she will conceive by the Holy Spirit, that God's presence will overshadow her, she doesn't ask questions. She simply says, 'Yes.' She says,

"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

⁸ Lk 1:5-25, & Lk 1:26-38

⁹ Luke 1:18

¹⁰ Luke 1:19

Unlike the priest, the young girl does not say, 'Oh yeah? Give me a sign.' Mary says, "I'm God's servant. Let it happen just the way you've said."¹¹

In the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke we see a contrast between the reaction of John the Baptist's father, Zechariah the priest, and Jesus' mother, Mary.

The supposedly wise old priest says, 'Prove it.'
The supposedly naive young girl says, 'I'll do it. Whatever God wants, I'll do it.'

And then we get to scene 3, our Gospel lesson for today.

Mary travels south to visit her kinswoman Elizabeth, who is in the late stages of her own pregnancy, carrying John the Baptist.

And Luke tells us that Mary walks into the house and greets Elizabeth. At that very moment, the infant John the Baptist moves in Elizabeth's own womb. Elizabeth believes that this is a sign. And Elizabeth herself also recognizes the presence of the infant Jesus in Mary's womb.

Elizabeth says to Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy."¹²

John recognizes Jesus' presence within Mary. And Elizabeth recognizes Jesus' presence within Mary.

By now, it is apparent that Mary has had a little time to reflect on her situation. And so she chooses to do something. Mary launches into a wonderful burst of praise and thanksgiving. We still use that prayer today.

"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord..."¹³

Or in the old Rite I version,

"My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior."¹⁴

Mary praises God for his mighty acts in the past. And she praises God for what he is doing in the present.

Mary praises God for his love and his relationship 2,000 years earlier with her forefather Abraham. And she praises God for the ways he is active in her world, in her day, in the way God is changing things through the presence of Jesus Christ.

God shows the strength of his arm. God scatters the proud in their conceit. God casts down the mighty and lifts up the lowly. God is active in Mary's life and in Mary's world. And in Jesus, God is going to be interacting with that world in a new and more glorious way. And for that, Mary praises God.

¹¹ Luke 1:38

¹² Lk 1:42-44

¹³ BCP p. 91 & 119

¹⁴ BCP p. 50 & 65

So Luke presents us with a challenge. Luke gives us the example of Mary, and how she responds to God.

And Mary's response challenges us in the way we should respond to God.

What does Mary do? What is her example?

First Mary says yes to God. That's always an important first step.

But as we heard in our Gospel lesson today, Mary does something more.

Mary praises God. She proclaims the greatness of the Lord.

And that's still a vitally important piece of our calling. We are called to continue to praise and worship God in this place.

Worship and liturgy are our strengths in the Episcopal Church—they are at the core of our identity and calling.

So we are called to continue to gather together to be fed by Word and Sacrament. We are called to continue to praise God.

And we are called to praise God for what he has done in the past. But we are also called to praise God for what he is doing now.

We've been in Lubbock for 108 years. As a congregation we've survived storms and tornadoes. We've come through world wars and depressions. We've made it through booms and busts. We've come through many different kinds of crises. God's grace has brought us safe thus far.

So we need to praise God for what he is done in our past. But we are also called to praise God for what he is doing now.

That means we also need to be like St. Elizabeth. Elizabeth is attentive to the nudgings of the Holy Spirit. She also recognizes Jesus' presence even in the womb of her young unmarried cousin.

In the same way, we need to be attentive to the nudgings of God's Holy Spirit. We need to be looking for ways that Jesus is present in our midst. We need to be looking for God, even in unlikely places today.

And we need to remember our calling to be like Mary. We are called to carry Jesus within us. And we are called to act in such a way that others recognize the presence of Jesus within us. We are Jesus' ambassadors. We are part of his body, his hands and feet to do his work in our world. Be fed here by Word and Sacrament here so that you may go out there as ambassadors of Jesus Christ.

Give thanks to God. Proclaim the greatness of the Lord. Be God's servants in the world doing his will.