

December 20, 2009  
Fourth Sunday in Advent  
Luke 1:39-45  
Pastor Craig M. Mueller

### ***A GENERATIONAL THING***

Didn't you think they were cousins, Mary and Elizabeth? Funny how King James Version translations get lodged in our collective memory. The Greek word simply suggests they were relatives, kin. That throws me off. You mean we can't say that Jesus and John the Baptist are literally cousins either?

I used to be able to tell you the definition of various cousin relationships. A little research revealed that in kinship terminology a cousin is someone with whom you share a common ancestor. But we usually talk about cousins as children of siblings. Their children are then second cousins and so forth. The child of your first cousin is your "first cousin once removed."

I've always loved to look at my family tree and see that I only have fourteen great great-grandparents instead of sixteen. The reason is that two of my grandparents were cousins. Which actually makes my brother and me third cousins ... in a way. And my dad is also my second cousin, once removed. Complicated, I know.

So yes, in some way Mary and Elizabeth were cousins, relatives, and thus, so were John and Jesus. We don't know if Mary and Elizabeth were first cousins, third cousins, or second cousins once removed. What we do know is that Elizabeth was old, childless and now pregnant. Mary was very young, unwed and now pregnant. They are of different generations, but united in a common experience. Their worlds have been turned upside down. Their children are destined for a holy purpose.

And as happens in the scriptures and in our lives, God's timing continues to surprise us. With Elizabeth, God seemed to move too slowly. She waited her whole life for a child. Some of us have been praying or waiting a long time for something to happen. Some of us may have even given up. We've learned the hard way that we're not in control.

For Mary, a child was conceived in her that she didn't ask for. She was just a poor peasant girl plucked from obscurity by that angel named Gabriel. We can imagine that she's pretty frightened and confused. There may be some of us who find something conceived in our lives that we didn't ask for. Something that doesn't make any sense and mystifies us. And we're not in control either.

After Mary finds out the shocking news that changed forever her rather uneventful childhood, we don't know if she went to have a heart-to-heart conversation with her parents, or her fiancé Joseph, or even her rabbi. But we do know that she went with haste, she hurried to visit her relative Elizabeth.

Maybe it was a generational thing. I'd love to know what they talked about over tea or on a walk. Did Elizabeth have the wisdom of years and experience to put Mary at ease? Did they share their feelings, their worries, their disbelief, their tears? Did they spend some time in holy silence, being together, yet with nothing to say? Did they hold each other when their emotions got the best of them? Did they recite their prayers together, entrusting their strange and unknown future into the hands of God?

I know if I were in either Mary or Elizabeth's shoes, I'd be asking "why me?" How will I get through this? We want cause-and-effect explanations and answers to make sense of things. Yet sometimes needing those kinds of answers is another way of controlling things, and we know where that gets us.

But have you ever been in a situation in which it is the amazing that happened, the blessing that is harder to understand, harder to explain? Why me? Who am I that such providence has dawned on me? Who I am that I am so lucky to have found you? Who am I that such a wonderful life-changing event has happened to me?

Elizabeth has that kind of reaction. The whole experience makes Elizabeth cry out with great joy and gratitude. Who am I, she says. Who I am that the mother of my Lord comes to me? The leaping baby in her womb foretells the destiny of the one to be born of Mary.

Many gatherings in the next week will be inter-generational. Parents and children and grandchildren, maybe even great-grandchildren. Perhaps cousins or even a second cousin! Some are from the so-called traditional or silent generation, folks my parents' age. Others are baby boomers, generation X and generation Y. Much has been written about the characteristics of each generation, based on the times, the culture, the context.

We have much to learn from each other. I love that this congregation has many toddlers, a lot of young adults, people in their middle age, and others who are retired and our respected elders. I also value having friends of different ages as well. It brings different perspectives, different life experiences, different joys and struggles.

This past week I read some "faith journey" reflections by a retired Presbyterian pastor who recently died. As he reflected over his life he mentioned a number of things he saw more clearly in his latter years than earlier in his ministry. A few that caught my eye for this end of the Advent season and for today's gospel: *Our relation with God is nine parts mystery and one part understanding... Faith is a matter not of certainty but of trust... How I live is a better indicator of my faith than my beliefs.*

In today's gospel Elizabeth declares Mary blessed among women. Mary's response is to bless God in words we call the Magnificat. My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, she cries out, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. And then these words: From this day all generations will call me blessed.

From "why me" to praise. But Mary goes on to announce God's blessing, God's favor on the poor and lowly and hungry. Mary's song is radical, not sweet like many of our Christmas carols. One writer says that divine love is particularly on the side of those whose dignity must be recovered. In worship and in living we follow Mary's example: we move from hearing the Word, to praise, and finally, to action.

We gather with Blessed Mary, Sunday after Sunday, from generation to generation, in this inter-generational assembly, to praise God and proclaim God's mercy. It's a generational thing. Nine parts mystery, one part understanding. Much promise and much hope. An early gift for us on these final days of Advent.