

Advent 4, Year C
December 22, 2018
The Rev. Dr. Dena Cleaver-Bartholomew

When I was expecting our first child we lived in an apartment in Atlanta and my husband David was serving as an Interim Pastor for a church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. That meant that he was gone most of the week, came home Sunday night and headed back out of town on Tuesday morning. It was at the end of my first trimester that I discovered that our upstairs neighbor Carla was also pregnant with their first child. Carla's husband worked nights, so when she and I were both home alone we spent a significant amount of time together comparing notes, sharing meals, preparing for motherhood, and generally supporting one another in the adventures of pregnancy. When I went into early labor and David was in Chattanooga, it was Carla who drove me to the hospital, much to the amusement of the maternity ward staff, who weren't sure which one of us was the patient when we waddled in together. After we had both delivered our babies, we continued to bond with our newborns, running up and down the stairs for advice, assistance and companionship. Carla's friendship and support was a priceless gift to me as both an expectant and new mother.

When I read the Gospel text of Mary and Elizabeth I cannot help but think of my time with Carla. Like us, Mary and Elizabeth were given the gift of one another as they embarked on a life-changing course. While pregnancy is a normal,

common event in human life, for the woman who is pregnant—especially for the first time—it is a whole new realm filled with nearly daily physical and emotional changes. For ordinary women the support, advice, and company of another woman during pregnancy are a great help. Mary and Elizabeth were no ordinary women. In addition to being pregnant, they were both expecting children who were exceptional in God’s unfolding plan of salvation. Mary and Elizabeth were relatives, they were connected through God’s Holy Spirit at work in them, and their children were also intrinsically linked. John even recognized the connection in *utero*, leaping at Mary’s greeting. Elizabeth knew instantly whom it was that Mary bore saying, **“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?”**

Advent is a time of waiting for all of us, an instance of expectant hope. For Mary and Elizabeth being expectant was literally true. They were in the process of transformation, of seeing and feeling change in their lives, of anticipating the change these babies would bring both for them, and for the whole world. Because we are not personally seeing and feeling the changes that these women were, it is easy to forget that we too are waiting for God to come among us afresh, to change us from the inside out. Mary and Elizabeth had the courage to say yes. Elizabeth accepted with joy the blessing she had long prayed for and perhaps reasonably

come to doubt, for she was a little old to be having her first child. John was such a surprise that the angel's announcement to Elizabeth's husband Zechariah that she would finally have a baby left him literally speechless. Mary had no framework to understand what it was God was asking of her when the angel Gabriel came to her to announce that God had looked on her with favor, but she trusted in God enough to say yes anyway.

We might not see God at work in our lives as overtly as Mary and Elizabeth did, yet together we await God's coming. Like Mary and Elizabeth, we eagerly anticipate God coming among us as a community, looking to one another for companionship, wisdom, shared meals, practical advice, love, and eventual joy. Some days are dark, as with the short days and long nights of winter, or in the pain and death and suffering we see afflicting those we love, and those who grieve in the world. Yet we anticipate the coming of Jesus, the light of the world. Sometimes, like Elizabeth and her baby John responding to Mary's arrival, we see that light in one another. Sometimes all we can do is wait when the days are dark and our spirits are weary and discouraged. We wait, trusting as Mary did that things will be set right, that God's mercy will be seen at work, righting wrongs and reversing fortunes. Mary proclaims this as Good News, saying: **"...the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation."** To fear God, as Mary understood

it, was not be afraid, but to have awe, reverence and great respect for God. When we order our lives as Mary and Elizabeth did, by loving and having awe for God, and by saying yes to God at work in our lives, then we too can expect change, and we can anticipate transformation. We might have no idea what that transformation will look like, but we can seek and embrace it together. You and I are not Mary, but we can learn from her. Thomas Keating, a faithful monk and man of deep prayer, once said,

What is the great thing that Our Lady has done for us? She brought the Word of God into the world, or rather let him come into the world through her. It is not so much what we do but who we *are* that allows Christ to live in the world.

Mary, by being a person who in trust said yes to God, was the kind of person who allowed God to come to life in and through her, and thereby change the whole world. You and I are called to be that same kind of person, one who says yes to God, who allows God to create new life in and through us. Who knows what that might look like? It could make for yet another extraordinary gift from God.

Amen