

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

Good morning.

Congregation:

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The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

Please stand as you are able for the opening Psalter reading, Psalm number 121 found on page 61 in your black Appleton's Psalter book.

I will lift up my eyes onto the hills from when cometh my hope.

Congregation:

My help comes from the Lord, which made heaven and earth.

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

He will not suffer thy foot to be moved. He that keepeth thee will not slumber.

Congregation:

Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

The Lord is thy keeper. The Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand.

Congregation:

The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil. He shall preserve thy soul.

Congregation:

The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even evermore.

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

A reading from the Gospel according to Luke.

In those days, Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me? That the woman of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be fulfillment of what has been spoken to her by the Lord." Here ends the lesson.

Sometimes our world can turn with the turn of a phrase. Just before our lesson for today, Mary has had a visitor, an angel in fact. The angel tells Mary the unbelievable news that she is with a child. "You will

name him Jesus and he will be called Son of God." Upon receiving this news, with haste, Mary sits out to see Elizabeth. Now, Mary lives in the midst of war under the dictatorship of an oppressive regime. She's Jewish, she's a teenager, she's pregnant and she's unmarried. She's alone. She is at the bottom of the rung of the socioeconomic and political ladder of the Roman Empire, and let alone she's just had this unbelievable mystical experience.

We don't really know what kind of emotional, physical, or spiritual state she's in. The text doesn't specify. Is she elated, overwhelmed, furious, terrified, vulnerable? Well, if Mary is anything like us, probably a mixture of all. Yet she's compelled to share this news, compelled enough to leave the safety of her home in Nazareth and travel 80 miles by herself to visit her relative Elizabeth. Mary arrives at Elizabeth's house and she is welcomed by an immediate and silent response from Elizabeth's unborn child, and as often well-timed baby kicks do, it opens one to new awareness and understanding. Upon Mary's arrival, Elizabeth greets her and blesses her and this response is not to be assumed.

You see, until now, Elizabeth has been unable to have a child of her own. In the ancient near East, often a woman either could have children or a family would pay someone to have children on their behalf. That was just how strong the expectation of having children was. Writer Regina Townsend writes about the lasting trauma of infertility. "Infertility changes how you see yourself in the world. Somewhere along the journey, many of us stop feeling as though it is something that has happened to us, but instead begin to believe that it is a part of who we are. We become used to living in a constant state of fluctuating between despair and hope."

This could have been Elizabeth's life experience leading up to Mary's arrival on her doorstep. Elizabeth long endured being seen as a failure. She knew what it was like to be the subject of public judgment, shame, and yet, Elizabeth offers a two-fold blessing to Mary. First, Elizabeth shares that Mary is blessed among women. Translated from the Greek, it means that she will be remembered well. She will be praised. Present and future generations will speak well of her and baby Jesus. Second, Elizabeth shares that Mary is blessed by the Lord. Here, blessed is the same Greek turn that Jesus uses to bless people in the Beatitudes. An alternative translation is happy is she who believed. Mary is blessed because despite all of the expectation that her social status has been reserved, she will be honored rather than shamed for bearing this child. When Elizabeth says blessed is she who believed, she implicitly contrasts Mary's trust in God's power and promise with that of her own husband.

Zechariah asked for proof that the angel's word was true. Mary asked for her explanation for what was going to happen to her and then gave her willing consent. Zechariah was the religious leader who doubted God. Elizabeth's blessing celebrates Mary's willingness to say yes to God. Our world can turn with the turn of a phrase. Elizabeth's prophetic witness strengthens and encourages Mary. Mary recognizes her vocation through Elizabeth's description and is emboldened to share the Magnificat. Would Mary had been led to sing the Magnificat if Elizabeth didn't believe her? After all, Mary did not proclaim her faith fully after the visit from the angel, but only after being received by Elizabeth who confirmed her call and blessed her.

I know the power of an unexpected blessing. A friend and I were so excited to learn that we shared the same duty six years ago. We imagined our little ones playing together, taking vacations together, growing up together. However, about halfway through my friend's pregnancy, she miscarried. It was devastating. I remember thinking how hard it must be for her to watch my growing belly and I once said something along the lines of, "If it is just too much for you to be around me, that's fine. I understand." My friend looked at me with sharp eyes and said, "I will love your child completely and wildly," and she has, every single day. With that sentence, I learned in new ways how love persists in the midst of grief and pain. My child-to-be and I were able to rest in the blessed assurance of her love, no matter how unexpected.

The world can turn with a turn of a phrase. This story about Elizabeth and Mary is a small story. It's about a genuine connection between two women who are marginalized by society for different and in some ways conflicting reasons, yet they find strength to turn the world upside down in one another. God gives Mary and Elizabeth what each of them lacked on their own, community and connection. God removes their isolation. They are part of something larger than their individual destinies. Together they are known more fully and begin to see more clearly. The world can turn with a turn of a phrase.

The coming of God is not through the mountain of a rebellion, but through the birth of a baby. God is at work in deeply personal ways that change our world. As we start this holy week, I say let us start small. Perhaps we can begin by being alert and paying attention to not only God's call in our own lives, but in the lives of others, and perhaps we can hear that call even better than the one who is being called and who knows, may we be called to offer a blessing on one another and perhaps even a leap for joy.

Will you join me in saying the Lord's prayer together saying, Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us as trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever, amen.

Please stand as you are able to sing the hymn number 211, Tell Out My Soul the Greatness of the Lord. Number 211.

Congregation:

(singing)

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

As we go into this day, may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you, and may the Lord grant you peace. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.