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A 15th-century German stained glass panel with the Visitation (Metropolitan Museum of Art)



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In hindsight, we think we can see the real meaning of an event. Often, we imagine a better way to have handled something or to have understood what was going on at a particular moment. We often begin our rethinking saying, "If only I had known ..."

When it comes to the books of the New Testament, the authors made ample use of hindsight to reinterpret the past, illuminate their present and imagine their future. New Testament authors interpreted the crucifixion through the lens of Isaiah's suffering servant (Isaiah [42](#), [49](#), [50](#), [52](#)), and the Nativity through [Isaiah 7:14](#), which says, "A virgin will conceive and give birth." Most of the time, the contemporary interpretation has little to do with the meaning the passage conveyed at the time it was written.

Remembering that, we can ponder today's selection from Micah, a prophet whose name means, "Who is like God?" True to his name, Micah prophesies that God will call forth a new leader from insignificant Bethlehem.

God seems to be avoiding Jerusalem, perhaps because it was a seat of civil power and the location of the temple, the crown jewels of Israel. The humble savior/ruler Micah describes is the antithesis of a great king. Micah describes him as a shepherd thoroughly dedicated to his sheep.

## **Fourth Sunday of Advent**

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Micah 5:1-4a

Psalm 80

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-45

While Micah mentions Bethlehem and a birth there, his description of this savior's unexpected character offers a deeper prophecy about the character and mission of the one to come. We need to remember that looking backward into the Scriptures to find evidence to prove a thesis is a method that can lead us to misinterpret God's word in dangerous ways.

The encounter between Mary and Elizabeth, like Micah's prophecy, portrays the wonders God draws forth from what seems to be insignificant. Luke tells us that after offering herself totally to God, Mary hastened to visit Elizabeth, her kinswoman. Their encounter symbolizes a meeting on the threshold between the old and new covenants.

Elizabeth and Zachariah mirror Abraham and Sarah, people of hopeful faith and the ideal people of God. Luke presents their son, John, as the noblest that nature could produce.

In contrast, Mary's pregnancy was not natural. As Gabriel promised, the Holy Spirit overshadowed her and from her flesh would come the Son of the Most High.

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The encounter between Mary and Elizabeth is much more than a family affair. In this moment, faith-filled and generous women from two generations recognized one another for what they were: genuine collaborators with God's action in the world, holy women willing to allow God's plan for creation to happen through them.

Just as God's marvelous works didn't take place in Jerusalem, we note that Zechariah, the priest and representative of the Temple and its religious sacrifices, couldn't speak a word as he beheld the wonders taking place. What God was doing was more than the temple could produce. Thus, the author quotes [Psalm 40](#): "Sacrifices and offerings you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me." This is what the Incarnation is all about.

In Luke's telling of the story, when she said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord, may God's will come about in and through me," Mary responded with all that God hopes for and from humanity. Mary offered her very body, her entire life.

As Mary came into her presence, Elizabeth seemed to understand immediately what was happening, and it led her to sing out the first beatitudes of the Gospels, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ... Blessed are you who believe that what God has promised will be fulfilled."

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These beatitudes describe the life of faith and God's relationship with creation. They remind us that God created everything simply to share divine joy.

Elizabeth recognizes Mary as a holy woman, a disciple who listens to God's call and welcomes God's presence. Mary knows that everything comes from the God who will "accomplish [in us] far more than we could ask or imagine ([Ephesians 3:20-21](#)). Elizabeth's two beatitudes proclaim what the Law cannot offer: God will become incarnate through those who believe and are willing to allow grace to work through them.

Today's Gospel invites us to perceive and celebrate how creation is pregnant with God. The Incarnation began with creation. It continues to the extent that believers are willing to be permeated by the Spirit and say, "Behold, I come to do your will."

Jesus' incarnation happened in one moment of history. From the manger to the cross, it was hard to believe in such a simple, humble God. It still is.

Let's ask Elizabeth and Mary to help us see what is happening among us, to discover God's workings and to leap for joy.

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