

Fourth Sunday of Advent

FLEEING OR FOLLOWING?

Luke 1:39-45 [46-55]

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Analysis by Bill White

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. 45And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

46 And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
50His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
52He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

53he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
54He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.'

Note: Regular readers of these text studies know that folks from our Crossings Community have been posting them online since 1996. So, for example, there are already four text studies available at www.crossings.org on all of the Gospel lections for year C, including this week's. As a result, some weeks it's difficult to find a "person with a problem" in the text for whom a diagnosis has not already been posted. This week is such a case. Hence, I wish to acknowledge from the start that my submission this week involves a good deal of speculation in regard to the diagnosis of Mary's "problem."

DIAGNOSIS: FLEEING GOD

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Fearful Fleeing
Why did Mary go to see Elizabeth? Perhaps to help her around the house during Elizabeth's last months of pregnancy? Perhaps to help Elizabeth deliver the baby to be named John? Perhaps.

Perhaps Mary is frightened. Time has passed since the angel Gabriel visited her. Perhaps she now goes with haste to Elizabeth's because Mary is beginning to "show," because she can no longer hide the physical evidence of her own pregnancy. Mary knows that she has not "known" a man, but who will believe her? So she goes now to Elizabeth's in order to flee the questioning, the gossip, the ridicule, the humiliation, the condemnation. Maybe, just maybe, her cousin Elizabeth will believe her story, or at least give her a safe place to hide. And so in fear she

flees from Nazareth to the Judean hill country.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Faithlessly Fleeing the Message of the Messenger*

At the heart of Mary's fleeing "with haste" is her fear, fear of what her family, friends, community, and Joseph will think, say, and do. Mary had believed the word of the Lord that came to her from Gabriel (1:38), but now that visitation seems so long ago. Mary's heart is questioning, "I know I'm pregnant. I know I haven't 'known' a man. But did an angel of the Lord *really* speak to me? Can I *really* believe what's happening to me is God's will, God's plan? Can I *really* trust the Lord is with me and will get me through all of this? Or is something else going on here? Is it my fate to be disowned, exiled, or even stoned?"

With these questions haunting her, the level of fear and anxiety intensifies. She decides to take matters into her own hands (faith in self and others versus faith in God) fleeing her situation to a place she believes might be safe.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Fleeing God's Savior*

Once Mary arrives at Elizabeth's she will have a decision to make about her future. She is scared and doesn't know what to do. Should she go back to Nazareth or continue to flee? Perhaps she should stay at Elizabeth's, have her baby there, and give him to Elizabeth to rear in a respectable home. Mary could then go away to a new city or even a new country where no one would know her. Maybe there she can start her life over again.

So, shall she trust her own instincts? Her own wisdom? Her own ability to solve her problem? Shall she flee from Nazareth for good? Flee from God's messengers? Flee from God's people? Shall she flee from the very child she carries whom Gabriel has said is the Son of God? Such fleeing is the way of death.

PROGNOSIS: GOD EMPOWERS FOLLOWING

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God Putting Fear to Flight*

The word of God that came to Mary is indeed God's Gospel. God is coming to dwell in the midst of his creation in the person of Jesus the Christ. Of all of the women throughout all of history, God has chosen Mary to be the mother of Jesus. "The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end'" (Luke 1:30-33). By his death on the cross of Good Friday and his glorious Easter resurrection this One, who will be called Son of God, will overcome the power of sin, Satan, and death; Jesus will fulfill the demands of the God's Law; by his own faithfulness he will cross-out the power of fear. For nothing will be impossible with God (1:37).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Faithfully Receiving the Message of the Messenger*

And so it is that Mary arrives at the home of Elizabeth and greets her. "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'" (1:41-42).

Speaking through Elizabeth (and John's jolt), the Holy Spirit confirms Gabriel's word from God to Mary. By the power of the Holy Spirit working through this proclaimed word, God takes away Mary's fears and replaces them with faith, faith that clings to God's promises, faith that believes there will be fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord (1:45).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Faithfully Following

This faith indeed trumps all the fears of life. Gabriel had said, “Do not be afraid, Mary,” and now by the power of Almighty God she’s not afraid. In fact, Mary’s faith—having been rekindled, renewed, and strengthened by the Holy Spirit—moves her to break into song (vv. 46-55)! Confident and clinging to faith, she will follow where God is leading, believing that for God nothing will be impossible. She will return to Nazareth, re-join Joseph, and accompany him to Bethlehem. There in the city of David she will give birth to the Son of God, just as it had been told to her.