**Sermon**

**St. Paul’s Episcopal Church**

**Amy Foster**

**December 20, 2015**

Micah 5:2 – 5a

Canticle 15 (Luke 1:46 – 55)

Hebrews 10:5 – 10

Luke 1:39 – 45

From today’s collect: “Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself.” Amen.

We’re almost there – it’s the fourth Sunday of Advent, and our preparations for the birth of Jesus, both spiritual and otherwise, are wrapping up. Advent is a time of not only of preparation, but of expectation. We have expectations for the joy we will feel at Christmas; we have hopes and expectations for the new year.

But today’s readings focus not on expectations, but on the unexpected. The prophet Micah wrote that from one of the “little clans of Judah” would arise one who would rule Israel. Micah prophesied that not only would a savior emerge from a humble and unremarkable family, but that he would be a ruler of peace—a quality that was not always possible among the rulers of Israel in ancient times. Likewise, in the Canticle we sang today, known as the Magnificat, Mary praised God for all kinds of unexpected actions—from choosing a lowly young virgin to bear the son of God to toppling the powerful and filling the hungry.

Although this Song of Mary, the Magnificat, is a centerpiece of today’s service, I’d like to spend some time considering the scene that comes just **before** she sings the song. It is the scene we heard about in today’s gospel – the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth.

Luke’s gospel tells us that Mary left Nazareth and traveled all the way to a Judean town to greet Elizabeth. But it doesn’t tell us why Mary went or what she was hoping for when she arrived. So, let’s try to imagine what might have been going through Mary’s mind. First of all, she had just been visited by the angel Gabriel who had told her that she would become pregnant and bear Jesus. Gabriel also told Mary that her cousin Elizabeth, in her advanced age, was to bear a son as well. While Mary seemed to accept all of this, and while Gabriel told her not to be afraid, I think it’s fair to assume she must have been reeling from this news.

So perhaps Mary went to see Elizabeth to confirm what the angel had told her. After all, if Elizabeth was, indeed, pregnant, then Mary would have even more reason to believe Gabriel. Or perhaps Mary didn’t know where to turn, and she sought out her older cousin for guidance and support. Mary was a young unmarried woman who found herself pregnant—she must have wondered how she was going to explain this to her family, how she would tell Joseph, and whether or not she would be condemned by her community. On Mary’s long trip to Judea, she must have been worrying about how Elizabeth would react to the news—would she believe Mary? Criticize her? Embrace her? Turn her away?

But, of course, Gabriel was right—Mary did not need to be afraid. In fact, in Luke’s account of the meeting, Mary didn’t even have to tell Elizabeth what was happening—Elizabeth was moved by the Holy Spirit (and the child leaping in her womb!) to perceive exactly what was going on. Elizabeth’s response was not only supportive and joyful, but likely quite unexpected by Mary. Elizabeth’s unconditional love and acceptance of this highly unusual situation must have been more than Mary could have dared hope for. And what a relief it must have been for Mary! The Magnificat was, in a sense, Mary’s big exhale—Elizabeth’s blessing meant that everything really was going to be OK; Mary could joyfully enter into her unexpected role and express gratitude that God had chosen her.

We may often think of this story about Mary and Elizabeth--and especially the Magnificat--as inspiration to be like Mary – willing to gratefully accept and carry out God’s will. But perhaps we should also strive to be more like Elizabeth. A young family member in a potentially difficult and confusing situation turned to her for help, and Elizabeth accepted her with unconditional love. She didn’t judge Mary or turn her away—she just loved her. When people have the courage to seek us out, to turn to us, to share something important with us, how do we respond? Are we able to open our arms and offer support? When we recognize that there are those in our own families and around the world who are suffering, can we respond with love and do our part to help? In Luke’s story, Elizabeth perceived that Jesus was literally within Mary—can we find Jesus in all those whom we encounter? Can we respond in unexpected ways—to counter hate with love, to respond to violence with peace, to create calm in the face of anxiety?

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, let us welcome and celebrate him just as Elizabeth did. Let us welcome and celebrate Jesus in every encounter we have—opening our hearts and our arms with unconditional love, revealing and sharing God’s love even when it is least expected.