

4th Sunday of Advent (Year C)

Luke 1:39-55

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 mother 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 a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

When was the last time you took a leap of faith? Maybe it was the time you decided to quit your job and start up that small business you had always dreamed of. Maybe it was that decision to retire after a long and fruitful career. Maybe it was the time you dropped off your teenage child at college and returned home an empty-nester. Or maybe it was that time you put down the bottle and decided to finally go to that scary AA meeting. Leaps of faith of any variety inevitably bring with them excitement and perhaps not a small amount of fear. It's a curious mixture, indeed. But above all, what must be admitted is that leaps of faith come to us as we are (sometimes quite unexpectedly!) but do not leave us as we were. Simply put, leaps of faith transform us!

If I were to share with you a leap of faith in my recent history, I would have to describe two that happened back to back. In April of 2014, I asked the love of my life, Tricia, to marry me. She said yes and a few weeks later, the two of us took another leap of faith together and decided that I should accept the call to be the pastor of a small congregation in a place we had never heard of before, a small island between the North and South Forks called Shelter Island. To make a long story short, here I am now sharing these words with you. And, boy, what a journey it's been - leaps of faith have the tendency of creating wild journeys with incredible stories.

Our passage today from the Gospel of Luke is certainly no exception. Both Mary and Elizabeth had begun some wild journeys of their own! Both women had become pregnant under extra-ordinary circumstances. Elizabeth had long passed the age of fertility and Mary, her younger cousin, was a virgin. And yet, despite evidence that would lead any sensible person to laugh at the idea of either pregnancy, both Mary and Elizabeth conceive. Elizabeth's child would come to be known as John the Baptist. Mary's child would be named Jesus.

Immediately after the angel Gabriel tells Mary of her miraculous conception, he tells her that her cousin has likewise received a fruitful dosage of miraculous conception. So Mary decides that she needs to investigate these matters herself. Therefore, she and her fiancée, Joseph, travel to see Elizabeth and her priestly husband, Zechariah.

If Mary needed any proof that she was pregnant, she soon found it when she entered Elizabeth's household. The pregnant virgin carrying the son of God enters the room and John the Baptist leaps within Elizabeth's womb! It has been said that faith is recognizing the presence of God. If that is the case, then that would make John the Baptist's action quite the leap of faith! Typically, when we think of John

the Baptist we think of a hairy wild man eating milk and honey in the wilderness. However, long before he can even grow peach fuzz on his upper lip we have John the Baptist recognizing Jesus' presence in utero! It is quite remarkable that John begins pointing to Jesus even before the umbilical cord has been cut by a beaming Zechariah!

I vaguely remember the first time my sister kicked inside my mother's womb. After I had reached the age of 5 or 6, my parents tried to have another child but had a good deal of difficulty. As a matter of fact, one of my first memories is seeing my parents very sad because they had had a miscarriage. One of my next memories felt very different! I remember being in another part of the house when my mother cried out to me to come quick. Once I had run to her side, she placed my hand on her belly, and after a few seconds, I felt my unborn sister kick against my palm. My mother and I looked at each other with glee and wonder!

Children kicking within the womb are a cause for wonder for all present. There are few situations that bring quite as much glee as feeling a child dance within their mother's body (although some mothers experiencing this in the wee hours of the night might disagree that this is *always* the case!). When my mother and I felt my sister leaping within her womb for the first time, our response was to laugh and smile. When Elizabeth felt her child, John, leaping within her womb at the presence of Mary and the unborn Jesus, her response is embodied in words that every Catholic knows by heart: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Elizabeth goes on to say that "blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

This passage overflows with fulfillment. The fulfillment of a prophecy made true. The fulfillment of two empty wombs being "filled full." The fulfillment of what John will later preach of one who is coming to save people from their sins. The fulfillment of fruitfulness brought to fruition.

We all seek fulfillment. The family torn apart by divorced seeks a fulfillment of renewed relationship. The homeless person looking for refuge during the cold winter months of the East End of Long Island seeks the fulfillment of shelter (as did Joseph and Mary on that cold, winter night). The church that has long been in a period of decline seeks the fulfillment of renewed energy and direction. The alcoholic struggling with his dependency seeks fulfillment in the form of freedom and wholeness. The community ripped apart by yet another act of gun violence seeks fulfillment of an end to such atrocities.

We all long for fulfillment in one way or another. In some ways, the Christmas season can be difficult for many because these desires for fulfillment come under the spotlight during these holiday weeks. We sing for peace. We pray for justice. We hope for healing.

However, singing, praying, and hoping are not enough. Fulfillment does not happen on its own. Fulfillment is not brought about by passivity. Rather, the fulfillment that we long for is brought about by concrete leaps of faith.

Today's passage reminds us that leaps of faith beget other leaps of faith. Or, perhaps put more appropriately, leaps of faith *give birth* to other leaps of faith; a chain reaction, if you will, that brings about the fulfillment of what is longed for.

- God takes a leap of faith in giving the responsibility to care for the savior of the world to a young, poor girl who, with her fiancée, is socially marginalized and destitute.

- Consequently, Mary takes a leap of faith to embrace the prophecy and take on the burden of bearing Christ into the world.
- Furthermore, Elizabeth takes a leap of faith to, likewise, trust that God is in control when her elderly womb becomes fruitful.
- Because of this, John the Baptist takes a leap of faith and responds to the presence of God incarnate in utero.
- Next, this leap of faith causes Elizabeth to respond with joyful praise.
- Finally, in the passage following today's text, Elizabeth's proclamation inspired Mary to sing her song in which she sings that "her soul magnifies the Lord."

After spending some time in today's text, it doesn't take long to realize that one leap of faith gives birth to another. Fulfillment is begun by God but then continues by human beings, like you and me, taking leaps of faith.

- For example, the family torn apart by divorce finds fulfillment when one of the members of the family takes a leap of faith and decides to open the door again to rebuild the relationships.
- The homeless person seeking refuge on Long Island finds fulfillment when some members of the local church takes a leap of faith and spend an evening cooking dinner for her and joining her for fellowship and friendship.
- The church that has long been in a period of decline finds fulfillment when a member takes a leap of faith and decides to invite a couple college students who can't go home for the holidays over to a church dinner to feed them for free and dote on them.
- The alcoholic finds fulfillment when a friend who has long remained silent takes a leap of faith to speak up and tell them that they are beloved and, because of that, they need to get some help.
- The community ripped apart by gun violence finds fulfillment when this society takes a leap of faith to consider treating mental illness as high of a priority as it does its obsession with high-capacity, automatic weapons.

Leaps of faith bring about the unknown. For some, leaps of faith can be exciting and refreshing. For others, leaps of faith can be scary and difficult. Most of the times, at least in my experience, leaps of faith are a crazy mixture of both. When I took the leap of faith to move to Shelter Island from Atlanta, I had no idea what would be on the other side. The past year and a half of my life has contained within it some of my greatest joys and my deepest sorrows. I have truly been transformed by this leap of faith and, by God's grace alone, I have shared that transformation with others.

What leap of faith are you being called to do? And before any of us try to talk ourselves out of it, today's passage reminds us that leaps of faith can be done from the oldest of women to the youngest of boys. None of us are incapable of taking leaps of faith.

What will be on the other side?

What transformation will visit you?

What fulfillment will leap within you and how will you share it with others?

The presence of God is something that must be shared. Look at John the Baptist, he literally couldn't even wait to be born to point to Christ! How will you point to Christ and the peace he brings? How will your leap cause others to see a sliver of hope in a world so desperate to be redeemed?

This world needs fulfillment. It needs to be filled fully with hope, peace, joy, and love. And you and I have two options. We can either wait passively for it or we can actively pursue it. The first option is called apathy and it leads nowhere. The second option is called a leap of faith and it leads to the fulfillment of justice and righteousness in a world that cries out for it!

So, friends, the end of Advent is upon us. The time for waiting is coming to a close. A leap of faith is knocking at our door. Let us answer the call and greet her with open arms.

Let us leap together, dancing within the womb where God is still forming us as disciples. Together, you and I will usher in the peace-filled kingdom of the newborn King, Jesus Christ.

Merry Christmas, folks. And happy leaping!

Amen.