

Homily for the 4th Sunday of Advent

December 22-23, 2018

Readings: Michah 5:1-4A; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45

Preacher: Brigit Hurley

As the Gospel story begins, a newly pregnant Mary is arriving at her cousin Elizabeth's home. They share a warm embrace. It is a tender, familiar scene.

But we can't let sentimentality prevent us from seeing the deeper story behind these two women.

What happens next is a herald of what is to come: Elizabeth recognizes the presence of the Living God.

When Luke writes that Elizabeth was "filled with the Holy Spirit," he uses language associated with prophets, or others who are about to speak out in prophesy under the power of the Holy Spirit. In a time and place when women had very little power or value, the Holy Spirit speaks through an older, longtime barren woman to reveal the Messiah's arrival.

This is the first of many encounters between Jesus and women where he upends the patriarchal culture into which he was born. Meeting the prostitute, the poor widow, and the woman at the well, he affirms them with his words and presence. He tells them that despite their lowly status, they are enough; or, as Fr. Greg Boyle SJ often says to the gang members he works with, "You are exactly what God had in mind when God created you."

Do we really believe in the dignity of every person? What would that look like?

It certainly wouldn't look like the photos we see from the border. And we wouldn't tolerate the ways in which women are still not fully valued 2000 years after Jesus acted otherwise.

Examples abound: the U.S. has no national paid leave policy. Women have few places at powerful decision-making tables. There are daily reminders in advertising, entertainment and media that women's value resides largely in their bodies. Low wages persist in jobs traditionally done by women—caring for the very young and very old, cleaning and cooking, etc.

And we live in a time when far from being valued, being a woman can be dangerous. Since 2000, the maternal death rate (deaths linked to pregnancy) has risen in the United States. At the same time, maternal deaths fell by 43 percent worldwide. In the United States, African-American women are more than three times more likely to die during childbirth than white women. In many cases, laboring women repeatedly try to alert doctors that something is wrong, but they are ignored.

This Christmas season, let's look beyond the traditional image of Mary as quiet and demure. When she said, "Yes" to God, she exhibited tremendous courage and power. How can we follow her example as we struggle to bring Jesus' radical message of the dignity of every human person into our broken world?