

MARY AND ELIZABETH

“Thou Bethlehem-Ephrata, too small to be among the clans of Judah, from thee shall come the One to be the authentic ruler in Israel.” Too small. Too small. But then again, not too small for the most important task in the history of the world—the bringing forth of the Savior of all mankind.

This passage reveals something about God. God loves the ordinary, the little, the seemingly insignificant, the unimportant, the unknown, the not famous, the hidden, the unnoticed. For some reason these are the areas where the Spirit of God works. It is very much under the radar, very much hidden in plain sight. God in the ordinary. Take today’s gospel. From a childless, elderly woman, the great herald of the Messiah, John the Baptist comes. Not from any great family or dynasty, but from an elderly childless couple.

And the Messiah himself? Born from a young maiden in a backwater, remote outpost in the Roman Empire. From Nazareth via little Bethlehem will come the Savior of the world. Not only that. It was underway for years, decades, before anyone knew anything about it. Biblical scholars have postulated that among many Jewish girls was a personal hope to be the very one, the mother of the one who would save Israel, who would be the long-awaited Messiah. Did Mary herself, as a young maiden, think that? Hope that? In those moments with the Archangel Gabriel, did Mary realize that she actually was the one chosen by God for this role?

And her relative Elizabeth whom Mary knew well and who had prayed all those years for a child, had finally had her prayers answered. Not just with a child. But with the very one who would be the new Elijah. Because nothing is impossible with God. Post-menopausal women conceiving? Virgins conceiving? Nothing is impossible with God. On the human level though look at what is happening. Mary leaves Nazareth in the north and travels south to the outskirts of Jerusalem, to Elizabeth’s home in Ein Karem, about five miles from Jerusalem. Mary wants to share her joy and share in Elizabeth’s joy. Do that. Bring joy to others. Dare to share in another’s joy. It is of God to do so. All the holy ones do that.

Elizabeth’s womb is filled with the child, John, but her soul is filled with the Holy Spirit. Just like Mary was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. And Elizabeth, who is a mild, long-suffering person cries out in a loud voice. She is filled with the Holy Spirit. Her words will never be forgotten. Never. “Mary, blessed are you among women. And blessed is the fruit of your womb.” That is why those words are part of the Hail Mary, the second most popular prayer for Catholics after the Lord’s Prayer.

What is going on in Mary? She is hearing Elizabeth’s words but it is not Elizabeth’s voice. It is the Voice of God. God is speaking a word from on high through the words of an ordinary person with a truth the world needs to know. God not only did this. God still does this. Ask yourself if you have ever had a conversation where the other person said something and you knew right away that it was the Lord speaking through them. I believe it happens all the time.

Same as back then with Mary and Elizabeth. How can this be, you ask? Is not the Holy Spirit poured out into you and me and us all?

What is God saying? Mary, your child is the One. The One awaited. The One to save the world from sin. The One to conquer death. The One to renew the face of the earth. The One I promised to send to you. That is why we celebrate the great feast of Christmas. Because the One God sent has come—in our flesh—to save us, has come. It is Jesus.. Just one last point. The little town of Ein Karem is at the top of a hill. It is a hard climb, an uphill climb. Getting to the point where we can finally hear clearly the voice of the Lord—is, for us all, an uphill climb. Expect that but continue to hope. Expect that and continue to trust the Word that God is speaking. Our lives really do depend on it.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace