

ADVENT IV “C”  
DECEMBER 22/23, 2018

I have a good friend named Adam. Adam finds joy in simple things. When Adam is happy his face lights up and his joy illuminates the whole room. Along with his radiant smile Adam’s whole body exudes joy as he literally “leaps for joy” jumping up and down, arms freely swinging. I envy Adam’s spontaneity. I wish I, too, could express joy and happiness so spontaneously and unselfconsciously. Sadly, most of us both by culture, heritage and custom have been conditioned to exhibit “restrained” joy.

In today’s Gospel story commonly known as the Visitation, recently pregnant Mary journeys to visit her elderly cousin Elizabeth pregnant with her soon-to-be-born child John. Both Mary and Elizabeth have been recipients of the grace of God in the conception of their pre-born children. Both are filled with joy at the gift of God’s promise taking shape within their wombs. Elizabeth greets her cousin employing the words that form the second sentence of the first half of the prayer the “Hail Mary” then immediately adds: “the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb *leaped for joy*” (Lk.1:44). The pre-born John, like my friend Adam, spontaneously reacts spiritually and physically. What is happening is much more than the normal experience of soon-to-be mothers experience of feeling their pre-born child kicking in their womb.

John’s *leaping for joy* recalls the story of young King David after his defeat of the Philistines bringing the Ark of the Covenant, (the gold-plated wooden chest containing the two tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments, a jar with some of the “manna bread from heaven” which fed the Hebrews on their desert journey from Egypt and the rod of Aaron which Moses used to work other wonders—all symbolizing the covenant made between God and the people) the symbol of God’s abiding presence among them, being carried triumphantly up to David’s new capital city, Jerusalem. The first book of Samuel tells us that David “came dancing before the Lord with abandon” (I Sm. 6:14). No sedate Strauss waltz, this! David was a whirling dervish! David’s “leaping for joy” was his giving expression to his joy in experiencing the nearness of God’s salvation symbolized by the Ark of the Covenant. Today, the pre-born John “leaps for joy” in his mother’s womb as he encounters the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise

to David, the pre-born Jesus in the womb of his mother Mary, her womb now the new and living “Ark of the Covenant.”

All of this transpires between two women. This, too, is significant. Jesus enters the world and is heralded as the fulfilment of Israel’s hope not by royal birth, in a rich and powerful city, or from a mother of fame, wealth, or political importance. As women, both Mary and Elizabeth were people without influence, their welfare entirely dependent on their husbands. Yet in their poverty and lowliness, both women share the immense joy of God’s faithfulness to them—Elizabeth, well beyond the normal age for child bearing pregnant with John—Mary, impregnated not by human means, but by the person and power of the Holy Spirit of God. In both Mary and Elizabeth God reveals, as Mary sings in her response to Elizabeth’s greeting in the hymn known as the “Magnificat” “the lowly are exalted, while the rich are toppled from their thrones, the hungry fed, the rich sent away empty.” Mary and Elizabeth “leap for joy” in the face of God’s favor, one in her vocation to be the mother of the son who would prepare the “way of the Lord”, the other in her vocation to be the Mother of God. While no record exists in scripture I can imagine both of them dancing with each other in their joy.

Our second reading reminds us that in coming into the world Jesus took upon himself a body, our body, our flesh and blood. The prophet Micah in our first reading reminds us that it was not in powerful Jerusalem where Jesus was born, but in the little forgotten village of Bethlehem. This message along with the persons of Elizabeth and Mary are God’s annunciation to us that no person should ever feel they are unworthy of God’s love, grace, presence if we but open our hearts to his grace. We, too, in spirit, in our flesh, can give birth to divine life.

In two days the simple, profound promise of God will be renewed in each of us. Like Elizabeth and Mary and my friend Adam, hopefully it causes us not only to smile at the favor of God to us, but even take the risk of abandoning all constraint and *leap for joy*.