

We see God in each other. I submit to you that is a radical statement, one that has been denounced and denied by the church. The church has told us that we see God in Christ, in the scriptures, and the sacraments, but not in each other. If we told people they can see God in each other, they might conclude they don't need the church anymore, and then how will people like me get paid? But the truth is we do see God in each other, and you cannot suppress the truth forever. Who are the people who have seen God in you?

We need other people to see in us what we cannot see in ourselves. Today we pick up Mary's story where we left off two weeks ago. Mary has been told by the angel Gabriel the impossible, wonderful, and terrifying news, that she would bear a child conceived by the Holy Spirit, and this child would be called the Son of God, take up David's throne, and have an everlasting kingdom. The problem is that Israel already has a king, and his name is Herod, and he isn't too keen on sharing power. Even worse, there was someone who already called himself the son of God, and that was Caesar, the most powerful man in the world who had all of Rome's legions at his command. How can an unwed teenage mother from Nazareth hear this news and not be afraid?

Once the angel leaves, Mary takes a road trip over 100 miles to see her cousin Elizabeth who Gabriel said is pregnant in her old age. That's a long trip on foot or by hoof, but Mary was desperate. She couldn't do this on her own. While she had Joseph, Mary needed someone who could guide her through this impossible calling to be the Mother of God. And upon her arrival, it's clear she went to the right place. Hearing the voice of her younger cousin, Elizabeth's baby does a backflip in the womb, and Elizabeth becomes a prophet. Filled by the Spirit she says, "God has blessed you above all women, and God has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" In this culture, normally it's the young who bless and honor the old, but Elizabeth reverses the cultural script and blesses the younger Mary and is honored by her presence.

Have you ever been around someone who is so secure in who they are that being in their presence is an honor? Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury said of the now late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, that Tutu loved himself in such a way that made it possible for you to love yourself as well. Williams said of being in Tutu's presence, **"It makes me feel that just possibly, by God's infinite grace, I could one day love being Rowan Williams in the way that Desmond loves being Desmond Tutu."** I think this is something of what Mary experiences in the presence of Elizabeth, someone who was so secure in who she was that she didn't need to play the ego game that says Mary is supposed to honor me. No, Elizabeth sees Mary and all she speaks is blessing and honor. Elizabeth sees God in Mary, something that Mary probably had a hard time seeing in herself. But Elizabeth could see it, and that gave Mary the courage to see God in herself as well.

Last week I said that the most courageous thing any of us can ever do is to trust that our core self is good, that our hearts are good, and that's true. But we often have a hard time seeing it, which is why the greatest gift we can give is to see in each other what we cannot see in ourselves, that God dwells in you. Now you might hear that and say, Joel, you're confusing Mary with the rest of us. She literally carried God in her in a way that you and I never will, and I suppose that's true to a point. Nevertheless, God does dwell in you, whether you know it or not, whether you can see it or not. The Apostle Paul says in **1 Corinthians 3:16**, **"Don't you**

know that you are God's temple and God's Spirit lives in you?" Don't you know that? No, Paul. Most days I don't know that, and I need other people to see in me what I can't see in myself.

I grew up in a family of overachievers. My father was valedictorian of his high school class. My mother was salutatorian. All three of my siblings were valedictorians, and I did fine but wasn't in the top ten percent of my class. So, I grew up feeling less intelligent than everyone else in my family, and I remember as a young child crying about this to my mother about how Nathan and Andrea always got better grades than me, and I just couldn't. I think I was in 4th of 5th grade. I remember her listening to me, and saying to me, "Joel, you can hold your own." I didn't even know what that phrase meant, but I knew that she believed that I had what it takes, and maybe if she believed that, then I could too. I've never forgotten her words to me. She saw something in me that I couldn't see in myself. Seeing God in others is the greatest gift we can possibly give, and it bears fruit.

Upon hearing Elizabeth's blessing, Mary too takes on the role of prophet and sings a song of liberation for her people. We imagine Mary as meek and mild. Our opening carol calls her, "Gentle Mary," and I imagine Mary had a gentle side to her, but she also had the radical voice of a prophet, declaring that God has pulled down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said of this passage,

The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings; this is that passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here.

Mary the revolutionary—I like the sound of that. Last week we saw how Joseph modeled compassion over judgment for Jesus. Mary models for Jesus God's special concern for the oppressed, that God is not content to leave our world the way it is, but instead wants to see God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. When God's will is done, the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, and the oppressed are given their rightful place at God's table. Mary prophesies of God's great leveling, where the poor are lifted up and the rich are brought down, not below others, but where each and every one of us is treated with the dignity and respect of the children of God.

Elizabeth sees God in Mary, enabling Mary to see God in herself. In doing so, she then can see God in others as well. That's how it works. Sometimes we can't see the goodness we bear, and it takes the eyes of another to see in us what we cannot see in ourselves. Despite what anyone else has told you or what you have told yourself, I see God in you. The deepest thing about you is not your sin, but your goodness. You bear the image of God which means you too are blessed among all people, and it's an honor to be in your presence.