

*Ruth 4:13-15*  
*Psalm 118: 1 - 9*  
Year A, Feast of St. Elisabeth

*1 Samuel 2:1 - 10*  
*Luke 1: 39 - 45*  
November 9, 2008

*Welcoming the God-bearer*

We seem to know everything about Mary. Next to only her son, she gets the premiere roll in the story. The Virgin birth fascinates and draws all sorts of debate. Entire histories have been sculpted about her parents and childhood. The Catholic Church has gone so far as to create the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception for her. That's right. The Immaculate Conception is for Mary and not for Jesus. The supposed issue is that Jesus could not be conceived in a person with sin. The solution is that Mary was conceived by her parents without sin. With no original sin staining her soul, she was a worthy vessel for God. By the way, the Episcopal Church has done something unique and actually taken a position that this doctrine is false. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, Mary has an equally revered position because of who she is. The Church calls her the Theotokos. This ancient Greek word is a description of Mary's first contribution to the Gospel stories. In her pregnancy, she is the Theotokos or the God-bearer. Mary is honored for the having the honor of carrying Christ in her womb. I am not sure if the Orthodox Church has a separate term for the work of being a mother and raising a Messiah. I guess they decided to focus on what they knew expressly in scripture and that revolves around Mary as Theotokos, the God-bearer.

Poor Elisabeth gets lost in the rush to crown Mary. For that matter, her son has a very similar problem with his far more esteemed cousin. Elisabeth labors in relative obscurity. Her story actually launches the entire

Gospel of Luke, but what is past proves only to be a minor prologue in the Christian memory. John the Baptist has the honor of preaching in the wilderness and ultimately baptizing his cousin. His parents and their witness seem somewhat ignored. The Rev. Sam Portaro, an Episcopal priest, powerfully notes that the ministry of John the Baptist is one of the most difficult in the world.<sup>1</sup> We all want to be the star. We all have a deep and burning desire to special, important and recognized by those around us for all that we do. Portaro rightly notes that John the Baptist has a more difficult road. He has preached and taught for years. He has the people of Israel coming to him. He has a certain power and prestige. Yet he has the difficult task of knowing when to walk away. He must promote his cousin as the person to take the glory and honor of God's ministry. In the end, he must even show his cousin the cost of preaching God's word. John the Baptist reveals that being a God-bearer leads to death, blazing the path for Jesus yet again. In much the same way, Elisabeth teaches her son that being important is not the first priority in God's kingdom.

Elisabeth has been waiting and praying for years for a child. Her neighbors and friends look upon her with pity. She is without an heir and hope. She has failed in God's first commandment to humanity: Go forth and multiply. She spends day and day hoping and praying. God hears her prayers and powerfully answers them. She becomes pregnant late in life when all thought it was lost. God blesses her beyond any expected level. Elisabeth rejoices and prepares for a son that has been predicted in the Temple.

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<sup>1</sup> Potaro, Sam. *Brightest and Best: A Companion to the Lesser Feasts and Fasts* (the piece on the Feast of John the Baptist).

Elisabeth reaches about the 6 month of her pregnancy when she hears a greeting from her much younger relative Mary. At that moment, the pre-nascent John the Baptist leaps for joy in her womb. Elisabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and becomes aware of the gift Mary now carries. The verses are beautiful. Two pregnant women, one young and one old, meet and rejoice. Elisabeth almost shouts with joy, “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?” In an instant, Elisabeth becomes the first to recognize God within the God-bearer. In verses almost forgotten to the average Christian, Elisabeth powerfully recognizes God before God has fully arrived. She is not concerned with her own place as the mother of a prophet. She does not demand that everyone pay attention to her and care for her. Elisabeth’s only concern is God and Mary, the God-bearer.

Recently I have been working with David Cook to revitalize the Building Committee. Through no one’s fault, we have had delays with contracts and a variety of negotiations on small points. We have started and stopped, largely because of me. I will take the blame and worry. I have been struggling with the best way to move forward. Maybe because of my background or my personality or just a broad sense of what I think is needed, I have been wrestling with the structure of how to proceed. There are two basic ways forward. The first is to focus solely on the building. The only problem is that once the building is built, the process, the plans, the ministry is completed and over. I don’t want our time together to end merely with the creation of a new space. The other option is to focus on a theme or ideal of ministry and allow that to move us in the process of building and beyond into our ongoing ministry together. So, I have been searching and praying on finding a theme for our ministry. In my mind, (and that is always a

dangerous place to be) I have been seeking a central image or idea of who we want to be as a community. Once we have that call as a church, the building should be designed and crafted to fulfill our needs in relation to that image. I have certainly preached before about this community in terms of hospitality. I have written about it in *The Messenger* and the Diocesan newspaper. However, something about a blind hospitality appeared to be missing something. In reflecting on St. Elisabeth, our patron Saint, I realized that missing point. Elisabeth does not simply welcome Mary into her home. She sees God in her. She recognizes Christ present when no one else knows or sees it. She practices hospitality to the God-bearer. If there is a governing theme or image or idea behind what I want out of our new space, it is the idea of welcoming the God-bearer.

Of course, I am speaking beyond Mary. I am preaching and teaching about loving everyone who walks through the door as one who bears the image of our Maker. I am asking that we work to joyfully see the God within each and every person. This is not a new idea, of course. St. Benedict made this one of the governing rules of monasticism. He put it this way, “All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ.”<sup>2</sup> I want our hallways and classrooms to reflect this desire to not simply welcome visitors but to welcome the God-bearers of this world. I hope that visitors will feel a welcome beyond a simple, “hello” or “please come back.” I pray that our church will be a place where we can all find God present within us and one another. I truly hope this community can be one that takes on the role of our patron Elisabeth who welcomes the God-bearer.

So let’s take a moment and try it, please turn to your neighbor and say, “I see God in you.” Go ahead. The idea may sound silly but matters. If

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<sup>2</sup> *The Rule of St. Benedict* 53:1

we see God in each other, then we listen carefully. If we see God in our family, they become more important than tv or computers or rushing off to extra meetings. If we see God in our neighbors, then we take the time to care and listen and love. So, whether you say it out-loud or not, the idea is critical in our lives and faith, “I see God in you!”

Elisabeth’s example speaks volumes to what it means to be a Christian. She welcomes Mary and takes care of her during her pregnancy for three months. At a time when friends and family and neighbors all are pointing fingers, whispering and likely threatening a young, unwed mother, Elisabeth protects and nurtures her. We have no record of Elisabeth demanding to be the center of attention. God has given her a miracle pregnancy as well. Yet, she works to care for her more famous relative. She patterns a self-less example to her son for his ministry and to the world for ours. Mary takes center stage and eventually Jesus as well. Most of us are far more like Elisabeth. We will do all that we can. We will not likely have millions of paintings or sonnets or songs written about us. All we can do is to work at recognizing that Christ is present in so many around us. We may never get a thank-you or a well-done or even a passing recognition, but we are called to do it all the same. I honestly and hopefully pray that we will all do our best, both in our lives and in our community to follow Elisabeth’s example and welcome everyone as God-bearers.