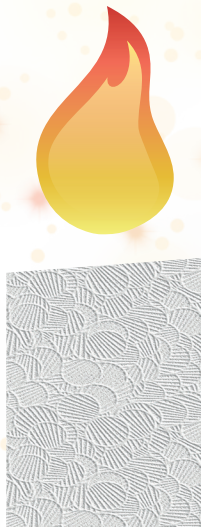


# RECEIVING EVERYONE WITH LOVE



## Reading:

*Luke 1:39-45 (NLT)*

*(Assign someone to read.)*

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“A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. At the sound of Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, “God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.”

”



On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we visit the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth in the hill country of Judea, where the central figures are two women: Mary and Elizabeth. Both women had something in common—they were pregnant at the time of their meeting—but they also had significant differences. Elizabeth was married when she conceived.

She was advanced in years (Luke 1:18) when her husband, Zechariah, received the news from the angel Gabriel that God had heard his prayer and that his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son named John. Luke 1:6 offers a noble description of Zechariah and Elizabeth’s character: “[They] were righteous in God’s eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord’s commandments and regulations.”

This is one of the most beautiful descriptions of a marriage in the Bible.

And what do we know about Mary? According to Luke 1:27, Mary was a virgin, pledged to be married to Joseph when the angel Gabriel brought her the news of her pregnancy. Matthew 1:18 explains it more vividly: “This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Even before His birth, Jesus was already challenging human conventions. Mary was not married when she learned she would bear Jesus. Today, with hindsight and knowledge of the whole story, we often overlook the implications this would have had in that society and time—a betrothed woman being pregnant before marriage. According to Deuteronomy 22:20, if it was discovered that a woman was not a virgin at the time of marriage, she was accused of prostitution and condemned to be stoned to death.

With this in mind, let's go back to the account in Luke 1:39-45 that tells us about the encounter of these two pregnant women, one of whom is described as righteous and obedient to all of God's commands and ordinances, including being married as a virgin.

The other is a young virgin, unmarried yet pregnant—a situation considered a crime punishable by death under the law of the time. How should a righteous and God-fearing woman receive into her home someone whom society viewed as immoral? Luke 1:42-43 tells us that instead of rejecting Mary, Elizabeth, a righteous woman with an impeccable testimony, welcomed her with open arms, feeling honored, filled with joy and love.

"Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, 'God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me?'" Elizabeth felt blessed by God and became the first to recognize the advent of the Messiah, Jesus.

What can we learn from this encounter today? In his commentary on Luke, Dr. Justo González warns of a danger, noting: "In our time, however, there is another important dimension to this story. There has always been a danger that good, faithful, and obedient Christians might become critics of those who do not live according to their own standards."

The story of "The Visitation," as this passage is known, invites us to adopt a different attitude. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth was able to recognize God's work in a situation that, by the traditional standards of her time, deserved harsh criticism, judgment, and rejection. The Holy Spirit who filled Elizabeth is the same Spirit described in 2 Timothy 1:7 as a Spirit of power, love, and self-discipline.

This reminds us that the Spirit's true work in the Church and human lives is not to make us believe we are holier than others.

We cannot claim the right to condemn and criticize those who, by our judgment, do not live righteously before God or follow His commands and ordinances. On this fourth Sunday of Advent, Elizabeth invites us to open our arms in love, especially toward those who do not live as we believe they should.

As Christians in the Wesleyan tradition, we must remember that for John Wesley, holiness and love went hand in hand. Wesley even defined holiness as loving God with all our heart and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Let God's Spirit of love fill our lives and make us instruments of His love.

## PREPARE TO WORSHIP

*Turn off all the lights and light the candles from the previous weeks.*

The fourth Advent candle is the Bethlehem Candle (violet), symbolizing Love. Over 2,000 years have passed since that significant encounter between these two cousins. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, opened her arms in love to a young woman who, by the standards of her time, had a questionable reputation and was worthy of death. That same Holy Spirit, who was directly involved in everything surrounding Jesus' birth, continues today to fill us with God's love, enabling us to love God and our neighbors.

But who is our neighbor? While the definition of "neighbor" may be familiar to many, some still have a narrow view of its meaning.

As we approach the celebration of Christmas, let us ask the Holy Spirit to fill us with love. Then, let us ask Him to open our eyes so we can see that our neighbor is every human being around us. We are called to love, welcome, and include others just as God loves, welcomes, and includes us.

## Light this week's violet candle

Today we see four candles lit: the Candle of Hope, the Candle of Peace, the Candle of Joy, and the Candle of Love. We are moved to know that God's light is increasing while the darkness diminishes. As we prepare to celebrate the arrival of our Savior, let us not grow weary of loving with genuine, unconditional, sacrificial, radical love.

Let us leave the work of judgment and transformation of others to God. Our role is to fulfill His greatest commandment: love God above all else and love your neighbor. Just as these four candles dispel the darkness, may our lives, filled with the Holy Spirit, dispel hatred, resentment, and violence with love.

*Extinguish the candles.*

*Conclude with a prayer together. Assign someone to lead the prayer.*

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