



Advent 2021, Week 4 Reflection

The Loving Gaze

Welcome to the Fourth (and final) Week of the Advent audio retreat, presented by Jesuit Connections and Charis Ministries. As we conclude our series and make final preparations for Christmas, recall the beginning of your Advent journey. Where were you four weeks ago? What were you feeling, discerning, anticipating? How have things shifted since then? Imagine there is an Advent wreath around your heart. Take a moment to light each candle as we turn our attention, one last time, to this week's theme: "The Loving Gaze." (This reflection was written by Patrick Farmer.)



"Stained Glass Window of Mary & Elizabeth's Meeting," Taizé © 2011 by Kate André

This Sunday's gospel is a favorite in our household. The characters are so relatable, the emotions so familiar, that it easily captures the imaginations of our one and four-year-old daughters. They spend pretty much all of Advent acting out the story of Mary and Elizabeth's joyful meeting with stuffed animals in their room, with acorns in the woods, with pieces of their dinner at the table - really whatever! The highlight is always John leaping in the womb, at which point our girls throw everything in the air and jump up and down shouting "My cousin! My cousin is here!" I don't always love when that happens at dinner actually, but I do love that they understand this is a moment bursting with joy. It's the joy of seeing and being seen by someone we love. It's the joy of being known in a way that helps us know ourselves more deeply.

Mary and Elizabeth live apart from each other in separate households and separate towns, and the movement in this gospel story is from distance to closeness. Mary sets off seemingly on her own into the hill country to seek out her relative and friend Elizabeth. The thought of simply traveling to visit loved ones fills me with longing now, nearly two years into the pandemic. I am aching for the sight of the family and friends I have been unable to see. It reminds me that we humans are made for relationship in a way that reflects something of God's nature as the Trinity. We come to know more of ourselves and of God through the loving relationships that define our lives.

Luke points out that Mary rushes "in haste" to find Elizabeth, and I wonder if she too needed the company of her best friend to help her make sense of all that was happening to her. Just one verse before this Sunday's gospel begins, Mary responds to the angel Gabriel by giving her consent, her "yes" to the invitation to bear the Son of God. Then the angel simply leaves her! In the aftermath of that transcendent moment,

what was it like for Mary to come back to reality? Did she wonder if it had really happened? Did she question what it meant? Did she worry that she had made the wrong choice?

It can take time for the effects of our decisions to unfold. Even after careful discernment, we so often have to wait to see the fulfillment of our prayer. This waiting can be uncomfortable and filled with doubt. After all, Mary still has her whole pregnancy ahead of her. At the risk of mansplaining, I'll just observe that having accompanied my wife through two pregnancies it seems that carrying a child is often uncomfortable, too. From my own experience, I can certainly say that this period and the newborn stage that followed was a time of doubt and discomfort for me. On how many sleepless nights did I wonder, "What have we done? Have we made a mistake? Am I going to be able to do this?"

That's where this moment of connection with Elizabeth becomes so important. The moment she hears Mary's voice, Elizabeth recognizes what Mary is perhaps still trying to keep sight of. Elizabeth addresses her as "the mother of my Lord." She tells her, "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled." It's a Beatitude, like the more famous ones later in the gospel: "Happy are you who believe, because what was promised by the Lord will come to be." Blessed are you in the waiting, in the "already but not yet" of eternal God's interaction with us in time.

Elizabeth gives Mary the gift of confidence that she has made the right choice, that what she has dared to believe is real. Sometimes we need a friend, a companion who knows us, to reflect back our deepest truths. They look on us with love and see who we are in the messy midst of change when we cannot always see for ourselves - blessed are you. You are in the right place. The Lord is with you on your journey to fulfillment.

This week's reflection on "The Loving Gaze" was written by Patrick Farmer, a 2017 alum of the Contemplative Leaders in Action program in Boston. With full hearts, we thank you for journeying through Advent with us. We hope this audio retreat served as a catalyst for your own prayer, reflection, and discussion. From all of us at Ignatian Young Adult Ministries, we wish you and yours a merry and meaningful Christmas season. And may God continue to grace you with hope, peace, joy, and love in the year to come.

Reflection questions:

- *Who are you longing to see this Christmas? What are those relationships that sustain you?*
- *When have you received the gift of being seen by another in a way that helped you better see and understand yourself?*