

## Fourth Sunday of Advent

December 19, 2021

Reflection by Sister Susan Quaintance, OSB

Mi 5:1-4a; Heb 10:5-10; Lk 1:39-45

The Christmas novena is a special tradition for many of us, and one of the most important rituals of late Advent. I especially love the evening prayer psalm antiphon for December 17 and eagerly wait to recite it. In case Friday night seems like a *long* time ago, here's the antiphon: "The fullness of time has come upon at last; God sends the Son into the world." Certainly the poetry of "the fullness of time" appeals to me, and it usually somehow fits the circumstances of life – whether it's the end of school before Christmas vacation or the end of a job or the wrapping up of tasks – the fullness of time, indeed. But, of course, it has everything to do with our readings on this day when the Advent wreath is completely lit yet we find ourselves waiting still – the fullness of time.

References to time are all over the scriptures today. The prophet Micah speaks of one who will come to save, whose origins are "from ancient times." Israel will be allowed to suffer until "the time when she who is to give birth has borne." In a verse from Psalm 80 that we didn't hear in the response, the psalmist asks God: "How long will you burn with anger while your people pray?" or as it translated in our Liturgy of the Hours: "How long will you ignore your people's pleas?" The desired answer is implicit in what we sang together: "Let us see your face and we shall be saved."

In other words, "God, do it now." The author of Hebrews puts words into Jesus's mouth "at the time when he came into the world" – an event which saved believers "once, for all." And Luke tells us that Mary went to see Elizabeth "during those days," the days of her pregnancy. She went "in haste." Elizabeth said that when Mary greeted her "at that moment" she felt her baby leap for joy. The fullness of time.

The *Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology* tells us that "the most important characteristic of the biblical idea of time is that of time which is 'filled,' time that is 'for something.'" And what is it time for? For giving birth. The lectionary tailors the answer: what fills and shapes and gives purpose to this moment is bearing a child.

That message can be a little tricky for a room filled with vowed celibates past the age of childbearing. And for a whole lot of other people as well. I sometimes wonder what would be different about Christmas for me if my body knew the sensations of gestation and labor and delivery. I've heard women who cannot conceive speak about what a difficult time of year this is for them. I know some wonderful fathers who love their children with every ounce of their being, and who marvel at the creative miracle they had a part in – but who, similarly, do not understand that the "fullness of time" means as does a woman who is about to give birth.

This is the point in the homily where I should share some nugget of truth, get to the bottom line, speak metaphorically about what is being born in me, in us as community, in us as church. But I can't. I don't know . . . which might give a hint about this elusive fullness of time. Everything is ready – plans planned and preparations prepared – but waiting still. Who is coming and how that one will come is still unknown. At this point I can only look to the gospel to see how one behaves

in the fullness of time. I see two women who listen to their experience of themselves and of God in their lives. One commentary I read spoke beautifully about one older woman who was thought to be withered up and whose son would be the end of an era – and another woman, young and virginal, whose son would be the beginning of something completely new. I see a woman who hurries over treacherous hill country and one who speaks in a loud voice at the Spirit's prompting. Both submitted to the mystery. Both trusted the promise of God.

May Elizabeth and Mary guide us as we wait, watching for our place in the Incarnation. "The fullness of time has come upon us at last; God sends his Son into the world."