

Message
December 19-20, 2009 – Advent IV
Micah 5:2-4; Luke 1:39-55
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For most of us this time of year, it's a time of great anticipation; filled with excitement. School got out Friday. We still have 5 more shopping days. As the roads and skies clear many will travel to family and friends. Our homes and offices are busy and colorful. Our schedules are interrupted with parties and visits. We pick up our pace and hurry to do all that needs to be done. There's a stirring in the air. It's a joy filled time, this season of Advent where we prepare, once again for the coming of our Lord.

At least, *now* it's joy filled. In following the readings, as the church lectionary asks us to do, we really need to question just how joyous this season is meant to be. Over the past three weeks we've listened to some readings from Luke that bring hope; but not without first feeling a little shaken with an apocalyptic message of agony and menace; a funky loud mouthed prophet screaming at us to repent; and calling us a brood of vipers; last week, for Advent III, instead of more harsh words from John the Baptist, thankfully, Paul told the beautiful story of faith, patience and perseverance from the prophetess Anna and holy Simeon. Historically Advent III is called, Stir up Sunday. It gets its name because we're so glad to finally draw near the end of Advent and it's warnings that we're stirred up by the hope of what's to come. So, now, Advent IV turns to joy and delight in anticipation of our Lord. And, as is always the case with how God reveals his saving grace and mercy, we're given two of the most unlikely of characters.

Two women: one, older Elizabeth, the wife of the faithful priest Zechariah. She lives in shame as she has failed to do what the culture expects, produce a child in her marriage. The other, a very young, obedient peasant girl, Mary, who's probably still living at home with her parents, doing her chores, minding her own business, and has no intention of being intimately involved in a marriage just yet. *It seems God chooses the two to work wonder and amazement with joy that can't be contained.*

This very precious, innocent Mary learns from the angel Gabriel, that she enjoys God's favor. God must be smiling when the angel appears to Mary to give her the news. "Mary," says Gabriel, "rejoice! You will be the bearer of the Lord Most High, king of kings, the one who will reign over all, the one who brings good news to the afflicted, liberty to the captives; the one who is the Way, the Truth and Life; God with us. Courageous and obedient, Mary humbly, offers herself to God: "here am I...let it be with me according to your word..." With this simple surrender, Mary's life is changed forever.

At least three things happen with Mary's blessing. We learn that God blesses inconsequential people in insignificant places; that there is unrestrained joy in surrendering to God's will; and we learn that God's glory is a celebration we must share.

First, Mary goes, to a Judean town in the hill country. The writer of Luke's gospel has already set the stage for the earthly kingdom. King Herod ruthlessly rules in the time of Zechariah. Emperor Augustus decrees that all must be counted and calls for a census. John the Baptist prophesies during the reign of terror of greedy Emperor Tiberius. The kingdom is ruled under Roman domination. Now, Mary hastens to Zechariah's home, not far from Jerusalem. But, far enough away where a devoted priest and his wife can live faithfully, perhaps more isolated from the civil oppression of Rome. *This is how God works God's holiness.* God shows up to the obedient and the humble; and especially to a simple, unassuming maiden, takes her to an unnamed town, not to a high priest's home, not in grand illumination. So filled with the Spirit, zealous with joy, Mary can hardly contain herself with her good news. And, it seems to me, that when we're filled with hope and promise, we want to share it, don't we?!

On Friday, one little preschooler, so excited that after so much waiting, saw that she could now officially walk across the newly paved sidewalk to the education building. So, proudly prancing across the giant walkway, getting to the other side, she cried out to all who could hear, "I did it!" That's how we are with Christ Church. After months and months of preparation and hard work, here we are in this beautiful new space, glorified by the Spirit; filled with excitement and joy, zealous in anticipation of what's to come next for our faithful community.

Mary, willingly surrendering to God's blessedness, in anticipation of a greatness she can only just begin to imagine, is greeted by an exuberant Elizabeth. After all, good news is only but so good if we keep it only to ourselves. So, Mary, and I imagine like most of us, is drawn to one who can truly empathize, hear her words of hope and awe, and share with enthusiasm in her great joy. We know also that Elizabeth and Mary share some other things. Mary has learned from the angel Gabriel that her cousin, Elizabeth, is pregnant.

Now, it wouldn't be Christmas time if we didn't talk about angels just a little bit. It's the angel Gabriel, the one who is closest to God, who tells Zechariah, the priestly husband of Elizabeth, that they will be blessed, even in their old age, with the birth of a son who will pave the way for the coming of the Messiah. It's the same angel who tells Mary she too will have the gift of a son, the most holy one. Zechariah, in hearing the news, is incredulous. The angel, maybe out of disgust, shuts up Zechariah. He's unable to speak until John is born. Mary wonders also. But, the angel keeps Mary talking. So, happily, Mary goes, anxious to share. But, it's actually Elizabeth who's initially so chatty. She shouts with joy at what the angel has already bestowed upon Mary, "blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb..."

Scholar Raymond Brown reminds us that the word blessed serves two functions. First, the word serves as an adjective, like we see in the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor, the gentle, the compassionate; blessed are those who mourn. These blessings, or macarisms, do not actually bestow the blessing; rather they recognize and acknowledge a state of blessedness. Blessed also functions as a participle, in the Greek word *eulogetos*. In other words, Elizabeth, in proclaiming the good news of Mary's blessedness is stating the obvious. God has most especially placed divine favor upon Mary and her unborn child.

Elizabeth identifies Mary as “the mother of my Lord.” Jesus, still in the womb, for the first time receives a title that has been reserved only for God. Mary’s greeting, and Elizabeth’s confirmation is offered with such conviction, that the baby in Elizabeth’s womb jumps with gladness in anticipation of a new age! How perfect it is that God matches the child Mary with the wise Elizabeth and that together they share in this holy time of amazement. What a comfort it must be for Mary to know the relief of connecting with a kindred soul and a woman older, wiser, experienced, who quickly affirms her blessedness. It’s always better when we’re traveling down roads of wonder, in times of discernment and preparation, to have companions along the way.

Now, all the mothers in the congregation can relate when we learn that we’re pregnant...we compare notes; share war stories of morning sickness, appetite changes, unexplained exhaustion, swelling ankles, clothes that will compliment instead of balloon. But, not these two women. Their blessedness just seems to overtake them. Elizabeth is beside herself that Mary shares her belief, to have faith that such miracles from God can actually be.

Finally, what do we do when we’re filled with joy at God’s wonder in our lives? We celebrate in song. Mary sings out at the honor God bestows upon her; Zechariah sings when his son John is born as the prophet most high, and Simeon sings when he sets eyes on the infant Messiah; all in the first 2 chapters of Luke! That’s a lot of rejoicing and a lot of singing. Mary, drawing from her Sunday School days, remembers the devotion of Hannah. Hannah served in the temple a thousand years earlier and sings to God a song of rejoicing and thanksgiving for the gift of her son, Samuel. Mary’s words echo Hannah’s grateful words. She sings about a God who has not just touched her life. But, a God who completely embodies her; a Holy and Almighty God who does great things with his love and mercy. A God who, with his strength, raises us up, fills us with goodness; a God who never forgets his promise to be our God and we will be his people. It’s a new age that Mary and Elizabeth herald. A time of hope and promise. A time of great joy with extraordinary possibilities. We give thanks and rejoice at how the Lord finds favor in this young girl, for how in her belief, and trying her best to be obedient, is glorified in God’s promise for her.

So we sing, we sing and celebrate with the words of Mary: (The Magnificat)

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior; because he has looked upon the humiliation of his servant. Yes, from now onwards all generations will call me blessed, for the Almighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name, and his faithful love extends age after age to those who fear him, he has **routed** the arrogant of heart. He has pulled down princes from their thrones and raised high the lowly. He has filled the starving with good things, sent the rich away empty. He has come to the help of Isarel his servant, mindful of his faithful love – according to the promise he made to our ancestors – of his mercy to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.*

God finds favor in Mary. God finds favor in us as well. We are blessed with God's Spirit within us. Now, as this Advent season comes to a close, and Christmas is just days away, with still, much to do, may we be caught, just for a bit, in the wonder of how God blesses us through his Son Jesus Christ. The snow has somewhat stopped us in our tracks. Maybe this is God's way to slow us down; to help us embrace the glory of God's presence; remembering that celebrating the gift of Jesus Christ is not just born to us on Christmas day; but every day. So, we wait these final days before Christmas. And, when our pace picks up, and we hasten again, may we first ask, how do we want to serve as those precious souls who magnify the Lord? And then, may we look for God's love and mercy magnified in all that surrounds us; especially in those small places, those moments where we're given a glimpse of God's glory and may we sing out with joy.