

Sermon: December 20, 2009

Advent 4

Texts: Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:46b-55; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45

LOVES SONGS: ELIZABETH AND MARY

This morning we take the fourth step in our Advent Journey. Earlier, we lit four Advent candles. The first candle was the candle of HOPE. That candle was the one we lit for the first time on the First Sunday in Advent. We lit that candle with these words:

Our hope is in God, and in his son, Jesus Christ. He is the one appointed by God to be judge of all things. He is the one whom God had promised to save and redeem his people. We light this candle today to remind us that Jesus is our hope and the hope of the world. We thank God for the promise he has made to us and for the light he has brought into the world.

The second candle was the candle of PEACE. The peace candle was the one that we lit for the first time on the Second Sunday in Advent. We lit that candle with these words:

Our peace is found in God and in his son, Jesus Christ. John the Baptist, and all the prophets remind us, that to receive peace we must be prepared for it. We light this candle today to remind us that Christ is the Prince of Peace, the one promised from the beginning of the world. We thank God for the hope he gives us and for the peace he bestows.

The third candle was the candle of JOY. The joy candle was lit for the first time last Sunday, the Third Sunday in Advent. We lit that candle with these words:

Our joy is in God and in his son Jesus Christ. Like peace, joy is a gift from God. It overtakes us and fills us when we remember what God has done and what he has promised to do. We light this candle today to remind us that Christ came, and is coming, so that all people might have a rich and abundant life. We thank God for the hope he gives us, for the peace he bestows, and for the joy he pours into our hearts.

Today we lit the fourth candle, the candle of LOVE. As we lit that candle we heard these words:

Jesus shows us God's perfect love. He is God's perfect love in human form. Those who believe in him and live in him, live in love. Love transforms and perfects all things. It never ends. We light this candle today to remind us that God is love. We thank God for hope he gives us, for the peace he bestows, for the joy he pours into our hearts, and for the love that redeems us and shows us the way.

With the lighting of the Advent candles, we have now completed our preparations for the celebration of Christmas. But before we celebrate, we stop for a moment to join two

women, Mary and Elizabeth as both prepare to give birth to their children. Mary and Elizabeth are cousins, Luke says, though given their differences in ages, most likely not first cousins.

Elizabeth, in her old age will give birth to a child named John, who will be known to the world as John the Baptist. John will be the one who will speak the words that will call the world to repentance in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

Mary, probably still a teenager, will give birth to a child named Jesus. He will be known to the world as Yeshua, the Messiah, or Jesus, the Christ. He will speak that words that will bring hope, peace, joy and love into the world.

But before either child is born, their mothers, Mary and Elizabeth meet and reflect upon the amazing things that are about to happen. Upon meeting Mary, Elizabeth's child leaps in her womb and she sings out a song of blessing:

Blessed are you among women, blessed is the fruit of the womb...and blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

Then Mary sings a song of her own, words which have become known as the Magnificat. They begin with these words:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for you, Lord, have looked with favor on your lowly servant. From this day all generations will call me blessed.

For Mary and Elizabeth the children they carry are signs of divine blessing. Yet it would have been easier for both to think otherwise. For a long time Elizabeth could not bear children. In those days, the inability to produce children was interpreted to be a sign of the absence of God's blessing. It was further believed that the problem or blame for barrenness belong to the woman. She would be looked down upon by others and people would wonder what Elizabeth had done wrong that she could not bear children. After giving up all hope that she would ever have children, Elizabeth learns that she will indeed bear a child, we becomes an interruption in her, although it is a blessed interruption.

Mary has the opposite problem. She is much younger and certainly of child-bearing years. Though betrothed to Joseph, she is not married when she learns that she will bear a child. Typically, an unexpected pregnancy outside of marriage would have brought great shame upon a young woman's family. It would have been an even greater shame to a man like Joseph, who would know that the child was not his. Though he does not want to publicly disgrace, he non-the-less decides to break their engagement. It takes a visit from a divine messenger to change his mind.

However, it cannot be ignored that the woman Luke portrays as traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem in an advanced state of pregnancy is a single mother. Yet when Mary learns that she is pregnant and that her child is destined by God for great things, her response is “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” She may not understand how God intends to use her life, or what greatness her child was destined to achieve, but she looks upon this as a blessed interruption. By the time she meets her relative Elizabeth, she is able to give praise to a God who has done great things in the past and who promises to do great things in the future.

When I look at the two women in this Gospel reading, the first thing that jumps out at me is that none of them are likely candidates as agents of divine activity. They have no social status. They have no wealth. They have no theological training. They are ordinary women living ordinary lives. And yet, they are blessed by God to be a blessing to others.

What this says to me is that any one of us can be used for God’s purposes. None of us would feel any more worthy to be agents or participants in God’s work than Elizabeth or Mary. Yet each one of us is called to give birth to some new creative possibility in God’s kingdom.

Too many make excuses for our not being fruitful or productive in the work of God’s kingdom.

“Don’t blame me,” some may say, “I’m too old. At my age you can’t expect me to be excited and interested in things. I can’t keep producing at my age. I’m just too old.”

Or some may say, “I’m too young, you know. I haven’t had all the experience the rest of you have had. I need a lot more years before you can have such great expectations of me. Give me time; give me time. I am too young to be productive. I have to take care of myself.”

We can learn from Elizabeth and Mary. The lives of these two women are interrupted by God. They were challenged by God and they responded in faith. How shall we respond when God challenges us.

We are not too old. We are not too young. We are not too impotent nor bound by the circumstances of our lives to respond to God’s call to participate in his work and to make a difference in the lives of those around us.

As we begin this fourth week in Advent and finalize our preparations for the celebration of the birth of the Christ, the one who comes to bring God’s salvation to the world, we must ask ourselves one simple question, “how will we respond?” Will we be able to say, “Here I am Lord, let it be done according to your word.”

In the name of the one who came to bring hope, peace, joy and love into the world,
AMEN.