

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 20, 2015
Fourth Sunday of Advent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Micah 5:2-4;
Psalm 80:1-7
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-56

Well, here we are, on the last Sunday before Christmas. Like the two young women in our Gospel lesson today, this season of Advent has been a season literally “pregnant” with meaning. With each passing day and week, the Spirit of God has been at work in our hearts, moving among us so that God’s power might be born anew within our lives.

Our Gospel passage is famously known as the “Magnificat,” which comes from the word “to magnify.” When Mary hears from the angel that she will bear a son who will be the savior of the world, this is precisely what she does. She magnifies the Lord.

And when she visits Elizabeth, Elizabeth discerns the moving of God in the situation and reacts by pronouncing a blessing on Mary that has reverberated down through the centuries: “You are blessed by God above all other women.”

It is probably hard to fully comprehend how pivotal this meeting of Mary and Elizabeth is in the unfolding drama of salvation. Luke shows us two humble women who recognize in their pregnancies God’s divine will, and in Mary’s

pregnancy they recognize the mystery of God becoming human. It is a realization by both women that God is “up to something” very special.

And yet, the revelation that God is doing something very special in their lives brings with it many emotions, and more than a few questions for these two women.

Elizabeth has lived most of her life unable to become pregnant, a sign of God’s disfavor to those around her. In her culture, a woman’s primary purpose in life was to bear children, so as an elderly infertile wife she has endured a lifetime of being treated as a failure. She knows from experience the pain of being shamed and shunned.

Now, late in life, she carries a child who will prepare people for the coming Messiah. Elizabeth might easily wonder about the timing of it all. She could very well ask, “How can God use me now at this stage of my life?”

And for Mary, the question of God’s timing may also be at the forefront of her mind. Whereas Elizabeth finds herself pregnant *too late* in life, Mary now finds herself pregnant *too early* in life. And she knows full well what that means. She is about to become a social outcast. She is about to be shunned and disgraced, not just by society at large, but also by her own family and kin.

In addition to feeling fear and anxiety, Mary might well ask, “How can God use me and do something special in me, given my circumstances?”

These are questions that are not limited to Mary and Elizabeth. They are questions that are often in our hearts and on our lips as well. In a season like this God may send signs to us that He is up to something, that He wants to do something special in us. But like Mary and Elizabeth, we may wonder about the timing of it all. We wonder if perhaps we're too *old*, or too *young*, for God to do anything remarkable in our lives.

Or we struggle to believe that God may be interested in us, given our past mistakes, our present circumstances, and our station in life. We may be tempted to join our voice with the young lady who sat across from me in my study several years ago, who said: "I feel like the best years of my life have been wasted. Why would God even care now about doing something in my life? What do I have to give that God could possibly find worthwhile?"

As Mary and Elizabeth wrestled with these questions, God was already at work to provide the answers. And notice how God is at work. Mary and Elizabeth don't come to the joyful realization of God's blessing through a scholarly study of texts. They don't arrive at their knowledge through their own cleverness. They do not discern what God is up to by consulting the learned scribes of the day. No. They discover what God is doing simply by paying attention to the signs given to them by the Holy Spirit.

When Mary greets Elizabeth, Luke tells us that Elizabeth's child "leaped within her, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit." The witness of the Spirit in Elizabeth then empowers her to boldly say to Mary: "you are blessed by God *above all other women*, and your child is blessed."

Luke uses two different words to describe how Mary is "blessed." In one case he uses a word that emphasizes that both present and future generations will praise Mary and speak well of her. And in the other case he uses the word from the beatitudes that means "happy."

Mary is blessed because despite all of the expectations, her social status has been reversed. *She will be honored rather than shamed for bearing this child.* And she is blessed because she has been given divine joy and happiness because she has believed that God is able to do what He promises.

Years ago there was a pastor who served several small churches in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Life in that part of the country revolved around coal mining. Many of those folks had long ago given up hoping and dreaming, living lives colored gray and black by the mines which surrounded them. Like Mary and Elizabeth, they felt that their options in life were reduced to few and none.

One day on his way home, this pastor passed by the county dump. He pulled in and threw some bits and pieces of trash and junk into his pickup truck and took it home.

When he got home, he pounded and scraped and hammered away until he had fashioned a paten and chalice out of that garbage. A few days later he sat at the kitchen table of a poor family. He prepared to celebrate the Lord's Supper with them. He pulled from a case the paten and chalice he had made.

The father of that poor family said, "Pastor, what's that you brought with you?"

Laying the paten and chalice on the table, the pastor replied, "I found this at the county dump. At the time it just seemed to be useless junk that had been thrown away. But now it has been transformed into vessels of beauty through which God can minister to the world."

Do you see it, brothers and sisters? In the stories of these two young women, these two marginalized and suspect women, God is reminding us again that he takes common, ordinary, imperfect vessels and shapes them to be instruments of his purpose in the world!

The story of these two women is the story of how God chooses to do his extraordinary work in ordinary ways through common people like you and me.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, God Almighty wants to be born anew in your life. On this day and at this particular stage of your life, the Holy Spirit is working, speaking to you through signs great and small that it's never too late or too early, that God sees in you what you cannot see in yourself.

Our natural response to this is to ask, “How can this be?” How is this possible?

This was Mary’s question as well.

My only answer to that question today is simply, “I don’t know.” I don’t pretend to know *how* God brings about his miraculous will in our lives. But the really significant question is this: *Are you open to what God wants to do in your life, no matter how crazy it may seem?* Are you open to considering new possibilities in your life where previously you haven’t seen any?

If so, then the spirit of Advent is at work within you. And if you continue to prepare your heart and life by opening yourself to God’s presence, I guarantee that you will not be disappointed. So let every heart prepare him room.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.