

## **Sermon for December 22, 2019 – “God’s Christmas Story”**

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A – Texts: Isaiah 9:1-7; Luke 1:26-45 (46-55 Magnificat)

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We have come to the end of Advent. Advent has been rough this year. We’ve endured talk of the end times, John the Baptist’s fiery preaching from the riverbanks his doubts while in prison. Finally today, on this last Sunday of Advent things start to sound a little more Christmas-y. We change our focus from John the Baptist to the Mary. I know it sometimes makes Protestants a little nervous to talk about Mary which many see as a very Catholic thing to do. It actually reminds me of a brief story I heard a few years ago about why so much attention is paid to Mary by Catholics. The story is told about a man who said to a priest, “I don't understand why you Catholics make such a big deal about Mary. I don't see much difference between her and my mom.” The priest thought a moment, then said “Well, I don't know about the difference between the two mothers. But let me tell you, There is a big difference between the two sons!”

So our Gospel reading this morning and re-introduces two women; Elizabeth, a woman thought to be too old to conceive and barren, is pregnant with John. Mary, a virgin still only engaged to be married, is pregnant with the Messiah. In contrast to the last few weeks grim discussion of darkness today’s story sounds beautiful and picturesque. It’s easy (not to mention more pleasant) for us to imagine two delightfully pregnant women, cousins, greeting one another lovingly. It’s a scene that makes us smile. But we forget to consider the struggles that these two women are facing. Elizabeth – as we recall from Project Sunday Three - is older than a pregnant woman should be. Not that there isn’t precedent in the Bible, but she and Zechariah will be raising a child in their old age more like grandparents who’ve unexpectedly found themselves raising children again. While Mary is a young unmarried teen girl and her fiancé is not the father of her child. At best, Joseph could call the marriage off maybe forcing Mary to a life of begging on streets with a child to care for. At worst, both she and her unborn child could be stoned for adultery. For both women in their day childbirth was dangerous and all too often women would not survive the birth experience without some degree of luck. So, there’s probably more relief than joy when the women greet one another as Mary has gone with haste to see her cousin to avoid the judgment of her hometown family and friends. The story of Mary and Elizabeth, rightly understood, isn’t really one of those Christmas movies. Rather it’s story full of fear and danger, one that stands in contrast to the Christmas image we generally try to present. Mary and Elizabeth challenge the notion that Christmas is about shopping, baking, decorating and hosting. Because Mary and Elizabeth introduce things we don’t want to talk about this time of year. Fear, danger, shame and uncertainty.

The real story of Mary discovering that she’s pregnant unravels and upsets our vision of the Christmas story. I mean, let’s face it, we don’t want Christmas to be like real life. It’s supposed to something different or least that’s what we hope to create. Like Clark Griswold, in the movie “Christmas Vacation” we want our families to have the perfect Christmas. The perfect and ideal vision of the perfect family, preparing for a new baby. This is the Christmas we try to tirelessly create each year, a diversion from the messiness and struggle of real life. We want to imagine Mary and Elizabeth as calm and peaceful expectant mothers as if this is the way that they’d planned to have children all along.

But our version of Christmas is NOT God's. God is telling a different story at this time of year. God is telling a **real** story about **real** people. About people who have **real** problems, **big** problems and no easy way out. It's about poverty, about unmarried parents, about unwanted babies, about couples too old to raise a child. It's about judgment and the threat of death. It's also about how God's people respond to fear and danger.

Sometimes the real world can get in the way of Christmas. While we try to create perfect memories with seemingly perfect families, God is discarding the rules about a great many things in order to send us a Messiah. As we stress, worry and prepare for the perfect Christmas, God is sending divine messengers to an old woman and unwed teen mom living in poverty. God does not wait for the everything to be perfect or to fall into place in order to begin the work of the incarnation. God does not come only when it's safe and there is nothing to fear. Actually, quite the opposite. God's activity of taking on our flesh and becoming like us starts **now**. God comes to us – whether we want Him to or not. Whether we're ready for Him or not. Mary's and Elizabeth's real-life shoves aside our idyllic nativity scenes visions of perfect Christmases. Mary and Elizabeth show us a **real** story about **real** people. A story about shame, about danger and betrayal. But also a story about mercy and about compassion and grace. For when Mary gets past the shame of an unwed pregnancy, when she gets past the fear of death for adultery she – with her husband-to-be Joseph - with her elderly cousins Elizabeth and Zechariah all become guardians of God's promise, bearers of the Word made flesh. This isn't the least bit surprising...at least, it shouldn't be. In many times and places it's the women who best celebrate the triumph of God. Elizabeth's profound greeting and Mary's transcendent song, which we've come to know as the Magnificat, echo the triumph songs of ages past in Scripture. Miriam, the prophetess sister of Moses and Aaron, sang of God's victory over the horse and the rider who'd pursued the Israelites into the sea. Hannah sang of God's victory over her barrenness borne – literally – in the gift of the boy Samuel who'd grow to become a great prophet, a sure sign of God's coming victory over Israel's barrenness in the time of the judges. These women's words herald God's powerful deliverance of His people.

But what are Elizabeth and Mary celebrating? Elizabeth has experienced a Hannah-esque conception. "Mary" is the "English" rendering of Mariam, the name of Moses and Aaron's sister. But where's the victory? Where are the dead charioteers and horses? All that we see it seems are a couple of women sharing good news about their unusual pregnancies and one of them sings. Their sons, as mighty as they will be, are not even born. Yet, these women are celebrating as if the victory had already been won. What's the fuss? Nothing's happened yet. But Mary lives in anything but a fantasy world. Luke has her singing her song "in the days of King Herod." More than a vague chronological marker, Luke's reference to the reign of the original King of the Jews carries nearly as much fright as the phrase "post-9/11." Herod the Great was notoriously great at killing off his wives and sons. The gloriously beautiful temple in Jerusalem Herod built was underwritten by the crushing taxes imposed on his subjects. Lest we forget, Mary lives in time of acute political tension. "The proud..." "The powerful" on their thrones and "the rich" have a face that fills the poor and marginalized with dread. Mary, however, is capable of overthrowing Herod and the empire he represents. Instead of revolutionary fervor what Mary models is how to live in the hope of Advent, how to live in between the ages, in the time before the coming of the promised Messiah.

So, instead of taking matters into her own hands, she sings. Instead of seizing power, Mary rejoices. The “already” is small. The “not yet” is vast. Yet Mary can cling to the words of promise that God has entrusted to her. The leaping of the yet-unborn John and the blessing pronounced by Elizabeth confirm Mary’s miraculous conception and equally miraculous vocation as the beginning of the end of the world as we know it. A virgin conceives and a poor peasant girl from a backwater village is named great. In these small signs unnoticed among the rich and powerful Mary sees the outlines of a divine revolution. Her song identifies God, and God alone, not any human agent as the one launching a decisive reversal of all of our power equations, **“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”** At last, God will fulfill His promise to bring forth a King who will shepherd His people with mercy and justice. **“And He will stand and feed His flock in the strength of the Lord.”**, as the prophet Micah declared. He will judge tyrants like Herod and redeem a broken creation. In fact, Mary declares these decisive events as if they’d already happened. God’s mighty reversal is all in the **past** tense. It’s as good as done! We who despise small beginnings and insist on seeing everything and approving of everything before we get on board will miss out on joining what God is doing. You see, this is how God works. Backwater villages. Peasant girls. Mangers. Mustard seeds. Shepherds. Fisherman. Crosses.

And brothers and sisters, here’s the thing...It’s the same for us when our fears and worries get in the way, when we aren’t able to see let alone understand what God’s up to. God comes anyway. And God bears grace and mercy for the world in us. Us. Can you believe it? Us. Ridiculous, huh? Maybe, but it’s true, nonetheless. God makes us the messengers, messengers of the Good News of God’s love and compassion for all, the Good News that God sends the Messiah to a frightened world. And in anticipation His mother-to-be models a hope that (thankfully) doesn’t begin with us or our ability to see. It doesn’t even begin with the Church. This is God’s Christmas story.

It begins with a radical, revolutionary God; a God who keeps His promises, a God who is true to His word, a God will put the world right. Believe it.

As Isaiah said...**“The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this!”**

Come, Lord Jesus!

Amen and amen.