

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:47-55; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45

Joy and peace to you my sisters and brothers in Christ Jesus.

What a wonderful hymn we sang this morning to begin this Fourth Sunday in Advent Service – “Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence.” Not time yet for the Christmas bells to ring, not time yet for the angel chorus to shout forth their wonderful tiding of an event that happened in Bethlehem, not time yet. It is the day before Christmas. Go back with me if you will, go back with me to that day before Christmas 2,000 years ago, to the day before Jesus was born. For most people, I suspect, it was a day like any other day. The shepherds had gotten up early in the morning and taken their flocks out to green pastures and then they patrolled those flocks, making sure there were no wild animals coming to devour them. That was their job, to take care of the sheep. A day like any other day for the shepherds.

The Wise Men, somewhere far over in a town in Persia, we are told, were probably in some dusty library, pouring over ancient manuscripts, reading the prophecies of ancient civilizations. Prophecies like you heard read from Micah this morning, “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. “ This prophecy, what could it mean they were wondering. I am sure they poured over this, and the other prophecies of Jeremiah, the prophecies of Isaiah, who had also pointed toward the coming of one who would be born in a most unusual way – “A young woman shall conceive and shall bear a son, and his name shall be called Emanuel.” A day like any other day for these learned Wise Men in Persia, studying, asking, seeking to understand what would happen, but yet no sign that these prophecies were to be fulfilled.

And, our old friend Herod, our friend the King in Judah. His day, probably like a day like any other day, was filled with crowd control issues. Especially since all these people had come from around the land, and into these small towns to be enrolled, we are told. That means they were to be put on the tax lists — we all know about that. So Herod was much concerned about crowd control, especially in this land where these people had been kept subservient to a foreign ruler – not a happy crowd. I am sure a day like any day in Herod’s like was spent with some fear of uprising and revolution.

Then there were the angels in heaven. A day like any day for them I suspect. Probably rehearsing, choir. Rehearsing for the greatest concert they would ever give. A concert, they were told that would have international ramifications. A day like any other for those heavenly angels practicing before the throne of God.

Then there was our friend Joseph. I suspect it was not a day like any other day for Joseph, for Mary had told him that there was this little one kicking her, inside her womb. Something was about to happen. Certainly it must have been a day like any other day to Joseph’s friend in the last nine months, questioning who was this child to be. What really is this all about? Did Mary really have a vision from an angel? He had given himself up in trust to the word of God. His

beloved Mary was soon to deliver, but it was pretty much a day like any other day for Joseph, until Mary said, "It's time! It's time."

A day like any day, but not for Mary. It was a day unlike any other day for Mary, I'm sure. This day before the birth of Jesus, for Mary had never before given birth. Never before had she felt a child coming forth from her body. Wondering, what would this child be like? All these past nine months, the angel visits that I read about in the elongated Gospel that I read to you this morning, all the angel visits, the visit that she made to Elizabeth, her kinswoman in Judah, who also had had a miraculous conception in her olden age with Zachariah. She was going to have a baby whose name was to be John. All these past nine months, the questions, the anxiety, all coming to focus in time when she knew a baby was going to be born. This baby, whom an angel had instructed her to name Jesus. She couldn't even pick the name for her own child. "You will call the baby Jesus," the angel said. Imagine the excitement, imagine the anticipation, imagine the wonderment, at what being the mother of this child would mean. He is to be the son of God, the son of God. A day like any other day, not so for Mary. A day unlike any other day in her life.

Fast forward with me now to today. The day before we celebrate the birth of this Jesus. I know that today cannot be a day like any other day for you, or for me. It is a day that will be filled with busyness, last minute thoughts as the family gathers, last minute things to do to prepare for the rest of today and tomorrow, but can we today take time in the midst of all of this and sit with Mary for a few minutes. Do it by yourself; do it this afternoon sometime; just take a minute or two and go off and sit down and just sit with Mary, and ponder.

Ponder who this baby is. For you, for you and for the world into which he came. This child who has made the front cover of Newsweek again this year, this child who fills the television screen with stories of his birth, this child who fills movie theaters with people, and yes, if you looked at the Sunday morning paper this morning, you saw this child who draws thousands to the Lancaster County play about the birth of Jesus. Can you take time to sit and ponder with Mary and reflect on what it has meant for humanity to say that the God who created the earth, the universe, all that is, that this God has chosen to enter into our humaneness in a very radical way? Who took the form of our humaneness; who experienced all that being human means.

There is nothing that we have experienced in our lives, my dear friends, the good days and the bad, the days of sorrow, the days of joy, the days of grief, the days of pain, the days of great joy that Jesus has not experienced. Even our death. He did all this to show us the depth of God's love. The essence of forgiveness and what it really means to say, "I forgive you for what you have done to me, or done against me." To promise us a life that transcends all earthly limitations, that life we call eternal. Just a few minutes with Mary, to ponder with her the mystery and the depth, of God's activity in the birth of this child. Just a few minutes with Mary before we return here, or perhaps to another congregation somewhere today, to ring the bells and sing with the angels, the glories and the joy of knowing that Jesus is born. But, not yet, for it is still the day before Christmas. So sit with Mary and ponder, just for a few minutes.

Amen.

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