

A Gift of Grief, a Gift of Glory

Fourth Sunday of Advent
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December 20, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

A little girl decided to make her own Christmas cards to mail to her friends. Her parents looked at the drawings which graced the cover of her Christmas cards, but they puzzled; they pointed to a figure that was apparently supposed to be Mary, and asked their daughter why she had drawn Mary's leg in such an unusual way? The little girl answered: "That's Mary stomping her foot. She wanted a girl!"

This is the season of making known what we want, is it not? We all have our lists of the gifts, all the things we want and expect to see on Friday morning (except those of us who cheat on Thursday night). The threat of snow yesterday was proof of that. Just look at how many people went scurrying. But do we stop for a moment, just for a moment, and ask the question, not what do we want, but what is it that we really need?

God was all too aware of what the people of Israel wanted, but instead He responded to their and, believe it or not, our deepest need – His presence, His participation, His being part of the lives of His people. And so He resolved to become a human being, one of us, that we might have what we need and that we might understand that He was fully aware, fully aware of exactly what it is like for each and every one of us to live.

There was only one way to do that. The writer of this morning's gospel offers his understanding as to how God went about that amazing and miraculous accomplishment. The account centers on two women, Elizabeth and Mary, whose pregnancies were inexplicably intertwined with the intervention and presence of God. Elizabeth, elderly, had long given up the hope of having a child. She had reached the age when such an event was totally unrealistic. Then one day, the most extraordinary thing occurred. The angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, and announced to him that Elizabeth was present and would bear a son. This in itself was a tremendous shock both to Elizabeth and Zechariah, but the angel said something even more extraordinary: their child was to be the long-awaited messenger who would announce the coming of the Messiah. The promised child was exactly what they wanted but he was also exactly what they (Israel), us, and God needed.

Elizabeth hid herself away when she discovered she was pregnant. She told no one. Perhaps she was embarrassed by being pregnant when she was so old. Certainly she was in no hurry to draw attention to her condition. After all, probably all of her friends were grandmothers by this time and here she is about to have her first child. It was all too much.

What Elizabeth did not know, but was soon discover, was that the same angel who appeared to her had also appeared to a relative of hers, a much younger woman, betrothed (not married yet) to a carpenter named Joseph. Elizabeth found out all about that when one day Mary appeared at her door.

This Mary, when she received the announcement from the angelic messenger, began to understand how important and great her child would be and in response to God's divine invitation delivered by Gabriel, Mary faithfully responded, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word."

Receiving our gifts of God's mercy and compassion and forgiveness and presence, are we ready to repeat after Mary "Let it be with us what you would will?"

It's interesting, don't you think, and remarkable that the fate of humanity's salvation rested upon a quivering adolescent girl, who quickly became a strong woman of great faith? To Mary was granted the paradoxical blessedness of being the mother of God. Well might her heart be filled with wondering, tremulous, amazed joy at so great a privilege. And yet that very blessedness was to be a sword to pierce her heart. She was blessed and yet that very blessedness meant that some day in a future that she had never even dreamed of, she would stand and see her son die an agonizing death hanging from a cross.

You see beloved, for all of us, Mary and Elizabeth, to be chosen by God so often means at one and the same time a crown of joy and a cross of pain and suffering and sorrow. The piercing truth is that God does not choose a person for ease and comfort and selfish joy to lord it over others on the basis of their own dramatic faith, but for a great task that will take all that we have to bring to it. Being blessed didn't protect Mary and won't protect us from suffering. For Elizabeth and Mary it was almost unendurable suffering, grief, and pain. Their stories and the stories of their sons are terrible.

Both sons met tragic deaths. Elizabeth's son, John, was executed by Herod and his head put on a silver platter and carried into a banquet of state that it might be presented to his daughter as a fulfillment of her wish.

And Mary's son, arrested, tried and condemned by the authorities, was executed on a cross between two thieves. Both sons, still young men, met terrible and unnatural deaths. Can you imagine the heartache of both mothers? No, of course not. Only a mother, and maybe there are some here this morning, only a mother who has lost a child – an infant, a child a teenager, an adult – knows the anguish and the pain and the grief of such loss. Only a husband in those circumstances has an intimation of the same.

There's an old Yiddish proverb that might have prepared Elizabeth and Mary: "Little children disturb your sleep; big ones disturb your life." Such is the harsh side of the reality of being people of faith.

Forget what you hear. We are not offered a cake walk through life simply because we are disciples of Christ, simply because we offer to follow Him. Our baptism not

only joins us not only to His glory, but also to His suffering and death. Discipleship, you see, comes with cost. A variable cost, at that. For some it will be major, and for others it will be minor. And for some of us, we'll only be aware of the cost after the cost has been paid.

This happened to Winston Churchill and a guy called James Allen Ward. In 1941, Sergeant James Allen Ward was awarded the Victoria Cross, Britain's highest medal-of-honor for those who have accomplished courageous deeds. Ward had climbed out onto the wing of his Wellington bomber, 13,000 feet above the Zuider Zee. Secured with only a rope around his waist, he extinguished a fire in the starboard engine. When the shy New Zealander was summoned to 10 Downing Street to be honored by Churchill, he was so overcome that he couldn't even speak or answer Churchill's questions. Finally Churchill said to him, "You must feel very humble and awkward in my presence." "Yes, sir," managed Ward. "Then you can imagine," said Churchill, "how humble and awkward I feel in yours."

Humbled and elated by what had befallen her and Mary, Elizabeth finally broke her silence. Filled with the Holy Spirit, the gospel tells us, she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb [the messenger that was promised, remember] leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord".

For the gospel writer, the Holy Spirit makes its presence felt for the first time in the person of a quiet old woman, Elizabeth. This Spirit reveals the truth about Mary's condition to both Elizabeth and the unborn child she carries.

Elizabeth's proclamation, while first acknowledging Mary's surprising condition and exalted status, also liberates her from months of seclusion and silence. At last her own pregnancy is announced and acknowledged. Both Elizabeth and Mary take on new identities at the moment of Elizabeth's inspired pronouncement. No longer are they marked women, because of being barren or a virgin, standing outside the most powerful traditional sphere available to women at the time, that of fertile mother. The unique, divinely ordained purpose for their pregnancies places them into a new sphere of influence, that of the religious-political history of Israel.

Elizabeth's proclamation and blessing inspire Mary to offer the remarkable hymn of praise, that we have come to call the "Magnificat." Mary's song is a startling example of Israel's continuing political expectations and it is also a song of subversion which empowers the powerless. Washington, take note!

But, first and foremost Mary's song is an outstanding hymn of praise. God is praised in terms of what He has done establishing mercy and justice then, now and into the future. For Mary is certain that God will do what He has promised.

Second, God will bring about a divine reversal of reality, the lowly will be raised up and the high will be brought low. Here Mary expresses the basic characteristic not only of Jesus' ministry, but of the final judgment of God in which there will be a complete reversal of fortunes. Beware. The powerful and rich will exchange places

with the powerless and the poor. So Mary's song is evidence of what has already begun and continues to take place, even as I speak.

And when this plays in life, it plays out sometimes in the most unexpected of ways, and the most unexpected of places. It turns out, I think, something like this. Fiorello LaGuardia was mayor of New York City during the bleakest days of the Great Depression. He was quite a colorful character. (If you want a good, exciting, read, check out a biography of him.) He used to show up in unexpected places around the city. One bitterly cold night in January of 1935, he turned up at a night court serving one of the poorest neighborhoods of the city (when New Yorkers say "the city," they mean Manhattan). Exercising his mayoral privilege, LaGuardia directed the judge to let him take a turn on the bench and preside over some of the cases. A tattered old woman was dragged before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She poured out before the mayor a tale of woe, how she had been deserted by her husband, how her daughter was sick, how her two grandchildren were starving. The shopkeeper refused to drop the charges, insisting that to do so, would fail to teach other would-be thieves a lesson. Mayor LaGuardia sighed, and said to the woman, "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions. Ten dollars or ten days in jail."

Yet even as he said those words, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it into his famous fedora hat, saying, "Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore I fine everyone in this courtroom 50 cents, for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat." Oh beloved, are we living in a town where everyone is clothed and fed?

"Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant." A total of \$47.50, a princely sum in those depressed days, was turned over to the poor woman that night. Fifty cents came from the grocery store owner himself. From seventy petty criminals and traffic violators, and the New York City policemen present in the court, contributed the rest. When it was over and the amount announced and presented to the woman, the courtroom rose of one accord, and gave the mayor a standing ovation.

What a birth. What a story. What a challenge. Are we up for it?

Amen.

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