

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Sunday, December 23, 2018

Year (cycle): C

The Collect:

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Old Testament:

Micah 5:2-5a

²But 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 of old,
from ancient days.

³Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labour has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.

⁴And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;

⁵and he shall be the one of peace.

Psalm:

Psalm 80:1-7

¹Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock; *
shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim.

²In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, *
stir up your strength and come to help us.

³Restore us, O God of hosts; *
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

⁴O Lord God of hosts, *

how long will you be angered
despite the prayers of your people?
⁵You have fed them with the bread of tears; *
you have given them bowls of tears to drink.
⁶You have made us the derision of our neighbors, *
and our enemies laugh us to scorn.
⁷Restore us, O God of hosts; *
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

Epistle:

Hebrews 10:5-10

⁵ Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,
'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body you have prepared for me;
⁶ in burnt-offerings and sin-offerings
you have taken no pleasure.
⁷ Then I said, "See, God, I have come to do your will, O God"
(in the scroll of the book it is written of me).'
⁸When he said above, 'You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices
and offerings and burnt-offerings and sin-offerings' (these are offered according
to the law), ⁹then he added, 'See, I have come to do your will.' He abolishes the
first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰And it is by God's will that we have been
sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Gospel:

Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill
country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.
⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And
Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed
are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this
happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I
heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. ⁴⁵And
blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken
to her by the Lord.'

[⁴⁶And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
48 for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.']

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Where were you born? How important is that bit of information? For the Messiah, it was of extreme importance. Scripture described the messiah as both a descendant of David and born in the little, non-descript little town of Bethlehem. It was like so many things in the life of Jesus, people who doubted He was “the One” had a check list derived from interpretation of scripture: David’s line - check. Born in Bethlehem – check.

When I think of small towns, like Bethlehem, I remember a tiny village we called home for a few years in far Western New York’s Allegany plateau. In the winter, it was like an Alpine village buried in feet of snow, bitterly cold and isolated. It boomed in the summers with tourists who came to enjoy Lake Chautauqua, but in the winter only the hardy full-time residents remained. Everyone knew each other, and most were related. Outsiders were immediately recognized, and if anyone became famous, well, it just didn’t happen.

Yet there was an incredible beauty. Especially in the evenings as night fell. I delivered newspapers after school, and would be starting back home when the Methodist Church's carillon would ring out hymns and Christmas carols. It didn't matter if the sky was clear and filled with stars, or if the snow was falling, I felt like I was walking through a Christmas card.

We think of this informally as Mary Sunday. Our scripture takes us to the visit between Elizabeth, daughter of generations of temple priests, and Mary mother of God. The babies these women will bear are the most famous human beings every born. There are very few people who have not heard the stories of the men these babies will grow up to be.

John's father, Zachariah was one of the many temple priests that worked in the temple two weeks of the year, and the rest of the year in a small town in the hill country. He was chosen for the honor of lighting the incense at the main altar at the temple – a once in a life time honor that was awarded by casting lots. As he was going about his duty, expecting to be alone, Gabriel appeared as a young man in front of him.

How was Zachariah to know for sure if this was a real angel? It had been four hundred years since the last time a heavenly messenger had been

documented communicating with a mortal. No wonder Zachariah was filled with doubt. But he was struck dumb as a sign, and only free to speak after he had agreed with Elizabeth that the baby's name was indeed John, as he had been told by Gabriel.

Mary was young, inexperienced, and single. Her betrothal was suddenly at risk, her very life was at risk because of this unexpected pregnancy. She turned to her cousin Elizabeth for council, support, and the closeness of shared pregnancy. Elizabeth's unborn baby seems to recognize the presence of the Lord, as the Holy Spirit fills her with the knowledge of the status of Mary's child.

It is interesting to contemplate the two pregnancies. Elizabeth thought to have been too old to have a child, and Mary, a young woman betrothed to a tradesman. Elizabeth's pregnancy broke the stigma of being barren. Others who worked at the temple may have thought the couple irreverent, violators of some law or other that they were undeserving of parenthood. While Mary, an obedient young woman, was to be put aside by Joseph because he did not feel he should face the shame of his wife bearing another's child.

Elizabeth committed her unborn child to God to be sent to the temple for fostering and education after being raised as a child set aside. Starting with Gabriel's annunciation, Mary was told in many ways that her baby was already set aside. Visitors came throughout his early childhood to worship him, bring him princely gifts, and pronounce him a king.

For those of use who are mothers, we remember what it felt like to carry a baby as it grew, then prepared as best we could to give birth. I couldn't even imagine traveling very far in an airconditioned car, much less by foot or donkey back almost 100 miles from Nazareth to Jerusalem. In our day, mothers meet their physician or midwife, tour the hospital or birthing center, take classes on breathing and all kinds of physical preparation. In the time of John and Jesus births, the midwife would already know you. Preparations would be in place, and everyone would know to call the midwife as soon as labor began.

Women would fill the space around the mother, keeping watch, providing all the supplies and support needed for the midwife. And the news of the birth would go through town faster than face book.

And these mothers give birth in the way of women since the beginning of time. They wrap their babies in swaddling clothes, wide bands of cloth that restrict their movements and help them feel secure, and keep them warm. They nurse them, and hold and comfort them the same way we were held, and we held our own babies.

And as they grew, they supported, and taught, and disciplined the children until they were grown. But these two would break the mold of anonymity. First John, then Jesus would become known throughout Israel. Supporters and detractors, followers and naysayers would know of their every move, and who can blame anyone for not believing that men of such stature could come from their tiny towns.

Yet it is just of such stuff God makes great things happen. He always chooses the least among many. David was an inconsequential shepherd boy. The youngest, smallest, weakest of his brothers. Now his decedent would once again be called to accept the crown.

Does that inspire you to see what your potential might be? Is God calling you to be more than you are? This is a time of great need in Grand Ledge, in Greater Lansing, even in the world. There are so many that need the support

and love that our little, inconsequential community of Episcopalians can do.

Over the next few months the Vestry and I will be walking with all of you in a path of discernment to see where we will be going as a congregation. I hope you will join us in choosing the next direction our path will take us.