

## LELC Advent 4 2018

Advent 4. At last. Mary, and in the Luke cycle, Elizabeth. Our text for today has two pretty distinct parts: the part where Elizabeth greets Mary, usually referred to as the Visitation; and the part where Mary responds with what is usually called the Magnificat, or Mary's Song. It is really easy to jump right to the Magnificat because there is such powerful stuff there – all the scattering of the proud and throwing down the mighty. But let's not. Let's hold on just a minute and spend some time with Mary and Elizabeth and the child leaping in the womb.

In fact, let's start at the very beginning. "In those days." What days? It is the days in the early part of the first century, Rome occupies most of the lands around the Mediterranean. Their tactic is to conquer, subdue, and maintain something they called "peace" by co-opting local leadership and leaving behind just enough troops to keep everyone afraid of trying anything. Roman officials let the co-opted local leadership tax the people to just this side of starvation - so long as they can still send the required tribute nobody cares. In the lands that used to comprise Israel and Judea, the local religious authorities are the ones Rome works through. That means means there is no longer king nor prophet to stand up for the people and stand up against the powers that be. "Those days" were some pretty grim days.

Oh yeah, and this is just after an angel has come and spoken to Mary and told her she is going to have a baby, and her relative Elizabeth is too. God was up to something, something big.

And then it says, "Mary went out and went with haste." I think that one line gives the biggest witness to the lie that Mary is somehow meek or mild. No meek or mild woman in those days would have set out with haste to travel anywhere, maybe not even across town. That she did so indicates that Mary was either extremely curious and courageous, enough to risk the dangers of solo travel to go see what was actually up with Elizabeth.

Or she was smart enough to be aware of the greater danger that awaited her if she stayed and folks found out she was pregnant: they might decide to stone her to death. You see, the pattern of an oppressive society writ large is often the pattern of the society writ small. The same rigid, punitive behaviors that existed between Rome and Judea existed between the community and an 'errant' woman. In a world that was filled with oppression and exploitation at every level, maybe Mary was all of those things: desperate, curious, smart, and courageous. But meek or mild? Not on your life.

Then the text says Mary went with haste "to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth." We know from earlier in the chapter that Zechariah is a priest. That means he is one of those "religious authorities." It must have been tricky to be a priest in those days. Being a priest was supposed to be about caring for the people, about being the conduit by which people could perform their religious rites and know themselves to be connected to God. The question for men like Zechariah was how to do that without being co-opted by Rome, without succumbing to the temptation to skim a little extra for oneself, indulge in a life of ease and privilege, and becoming just another cog in the wheel of the systemic oppression and exploitation that was the Roman Empire. We don't know for sure about Zechariah. He is up in the Judean hill country, and not in the halls of power of Jerusalem. Whatever was the case, his home was a safe enough place for Mary for now, at least she wouldn't have to worry about getting stoned to death.

Then it says, "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting the child leaped in her womb." That verb, "leaped" in Greek is *skirtao*. It is the same word that is used in the Septuagint when it talks about Rebecca and how Esau and Jacob *skirtao*-ed within her. There it is translated "struggled" or "wrestled."

Any woman who has birthed a baby can tell you how this part goes. It's just physics. As that baby grows, there is less and less room. The baby gets stronger and more active. And it gets more and more uncomfortable. It gets to where Something Has To Happen! This Baby Has Got To Be Born!

That's how it feels today, when Advent 4 has fallen on December 23<sup>rd</sup>. All the cantatas and concerts are done, all the parties and pageants are over. Advent, this time of waiting, comes to this: two pregnant women waiting to give birth. It brings to mind a really wonderful video clip I saw online. It is 6 minutes well spent. It is of Valarie Kaur, a Sikh woman, speaking at an inter-faith prayer service in Washington D.C. on December 31, 2016. Together people of all different faiths are speaking about and praying for the future of our country. And toward the end of her speech Ms. Kaur says "but the mother in me asks 'what if?'; what if this present darkness..."

Now, I gotta stop here and lift up that fact that when she was speaking the present darkness did not yet include things like denying people with green cards re-entry into our country. Names like Mother Emanuel and Charlottesville, Stoneman Douglad and Tree of Life did not yet include the emotional gut-punch they now hold. We didn't know who Antwon Rose or Botham Jean or Jemel Roberson even were. The climate chaos did not yet include things like Hurricane Maria, or the Camp Fire. Detainment camps for immigrant children were unimaginable.

So when I watch her speech, I think about this present darkness and think with her, What if? "What if this present darkness," she said, "is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?" I LOVE THAT! What is the darkness of Advent if NOT the darkness of womb? The waiting for something new to be born? To us, for us, within us?

The word for "womb" that is used in our text is *koilia*. It means womb, or belly, or heart, or whatever is the innermost part of our being. What if, out of the innermost part of us, something is waiting to be born? And not just waiting patiently, in the silent darkness. But struggling, pushing, shoving, to get out, to get into the world? What if Jesus is struggling to be born anew in us? Or maybe through us into the world? What would that even mean? What would that look like? Would it make a difference in our lives? In our words, or our actions?

I don't know if I've reached curmudgeon status yet or not, but I find myself less and less patient with the cute-i-fication of Christmas. The Christmas cards depicting cozy and softly back-lit manger scenes and the children dressing up for Christmas pageants which make us giggle and take pictures feel like a decoy. Mary's Song was anything but cute! She is singing some serious stuff. She is talking about overthrowing the world order. Which is exactly what God in Jesus was doing. But not the way we humans usually think about it.

In the long sad story that is human history, every time one set of humans have thrown down powerful ones or sent rich ones away empty all that happened is new faces were put in the positions of power and privilege. But in Jesus, God was re-working the whole shebang. I think of the Pharisees, and how, in his teachings about God's love and forgiveness, Jesus scattered their prideful, rule-following self-righteousness. I think of Jairus, the commander who humbly kneeled at Jesus's feet to beg for the healing of his daughter. I think of Zaccheous and how he was emptied of his greed and corruption, enough to return money to those he exploited.

In Jesus, God was; No, God IS ushering in a whole new world order – one where all are fed good things, strangers are welcomed. And all are safe in homes where they can be who they are created and called to be. The way Jesus did it was his welcome, and healing, and love was so powerfully lived out

within community that rich and powerful came, hat in hand, to be welcomed and cared for too. And they were! Welcomed, healed, cared for, they were transformed.

That's still how God is doing it. It happens whenever, wherever, we let Jesus be born in us, through us, through our words and actions, in our acts of love, of healing, of welcome, of kindness, and, (maybe most importantly these days) our acts of courage. The power of Jesus' self-giving love transforms the world.

Miracle of miracles folks. We are all Mary. God looks on us, on our lowliness. None of us are of high station, or great wealth. And yet God looks with favor on us, God deigns to be born anew in and through us. And blessed are we when we let Jesus be born in us, through us.

Maybe you are getting pretty far along. Maybe some project or action is struggling within you, ready to be undertaken or risked. Maybe the Spirit has been quietly urging you for some time to speak or to reach out somehow. What if the whole world is waiting? I think it is. I think the whole world is waiting for that kind of love to be born in us all.

May whatever is holding us back, whatever fear, whatever pain, whatever ego trip that keeps us from opening to being loved and loving in return give way. May Jesus come to us, in us, and through us. May Jesus come soon. Amen.