

Fourth Sunday in Advent – 2021

Micah 5:2-5a

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-56

A pregnant old woman – now there's something that you don't see every day. People are always hesitant to congratulate a woman who they think is pregnant. No one wants to be wrong on that score because it's terribly embarrassing. So, what were Elizabeth's neighbors saying to each other at first? Gee, Elizabeth sure seems to be putting on weight. Yeah, but she also seems to be pretty happy about it. Go figure.

A pregnant old woman – you certainly don't see that every day. By my recollection, you see it once every two thousand years or so. There've only been two, after all. Sarah was ninety years old when she conceived Isaac. Abraham was 100. Clearly, that was a miraculous conception. Isaac was laughter incarnate. When told that they would have a child, both Abraham and Sarah laughed with incredulity. God loved that laughter and gave the boy his name. The Bible doesn't tell us how old Elizabeth was when she conceived John, but says that she was "advanced in years," a euphemism for old and wrinkly.

St. Luke tells us that Elizabeth hid herself away for five months. When she emerged, there must've been some startled folks. What? How did this happen? Normally, when a pregnant woman hears that kind of question she replies with a one-liner or a quick lesson about the birds and the bees. What would've been Elizabeth's response? It was no picnic to be barren at that time. Elizabeth's contemporaries would've equated her childlessness with God's displeasure at them. The weight of that burden on her... what was that like? Having your neighbors view you as cursed or continuing in some hidden sin and a commensurate guilt before God... that has to be horrible. You'll never meet Elizabeth in this life, but how would you have treated her? How do you view people who seem to be on the outs with God, on the outs with the religiously in? Here's what Elizabeth said about her pregnancy: "In this way the Lord has dealt with me at the time when he looked upon me in order to take away my shame among men" (Luke 1:25).

It keeps getting better for Elizabeth. She has a husband who isn't allowed to speak during her pregnancy. When the angel Gabriel announced the conception of John to Zechariah, Ole Zechariah didn't exactly cover himself in faithful glory. If it wasn't rank skepticism, it was something close, especially for a priest. "How shall I know this? For I am an old man and my good lady wife is advanced in years" (Luke 1:18). Not a great response. Take note: when you receive a message from an archangel it is best not to call his word into question. When Abraham laughed at the prospect of Sarah conceiving, he wasn't struck dumb for nine months. Zechariah was. Zechariah had nine months to contemplate his questioning heart. Elizabeth, meanwhile, was elated; more so when Mary arrives for a visit.

These two women, cousins of some sort, are a portrait of life. Certainly, a sense of wonder envelops them both, and a spirit of humility colors every word out of their mouths – but this is a scene of joy. Elizabeth and John are the antithesis to Planned Parenthood and their grisly assault on the womb of woman. Planned Parenthood exists to crush joy, to extinguish life, to pretend that life is not exquisite and to make death a solution, to make death a god. Elizabeth knows

better. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth knows who it is who has come to visit her. Mary; how does Elizabeth greet her? Not “oh, my cousin’s delightful daughter;” not “oh, my sweet relative from Nazareth,” but Mary, “the mother of my Lord.” John is elated. In the womb, John leaps for joy. Everyone and everything in this encounter is spoken of in relation to the Christ who is in Mary’s womb. *He is* joy incarnate. *He is* life. He is strength and beauty and victory and hope. He is peace and love and grace and kindness. He is courage and humility and truth and endless glory. This unborn baby *is* God and He brings salvation. He brings *joy*.

Those two women, the young and the old, both with child – their lives were not easy. It’s not easy being a Christian woman in our age. The culture certainly doesn’t lift up maternal virtue, doesn’t support women in their vocation as mothers, doesn’t applaud modesty, chastity, monogamy and marriage. Remember, you are not to join together what God has separated. What fellowship has light with darkness? You can’t serve two masters. Salt water and fresh water don’t come from the same spring. Does anyone here believe that joy is to be found in following worldly precepts? Anyone? I get the sense from this window into Mary and Elizabeth that they weren’t divided in their allegiances. Neither were they preoccupied with the Roman government and what Caesar was up to. Their lives weren’t easy but joy erupts in their hearts and minds. God is near and He is present to fulfill His promises. Those who are seemingly forgotten and by no means forgotten, not by God.

Bethlehem, a town of such little acclaim that it could scarcely be included among the tribes of Judah – that is where the Messianic King is born, where God first reveals His sacred face. Nazareth, a backwater town that was so infamous that it had its own cliché: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46). That is the town where the Son of God chose to grow up. Each of you ought to get an icon of an old pregnant woman and put it up in your home to remind you that God will never forget you. The small, the marginalized, the seemingly unimportant – you are everything to Him. His ways are not the world’s ways. St. Paul wrote this: “Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1 Corinthians 1:20). “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Corinthians 1:27). He chose Elizabeth. He chose Mary, a no-account virgin in no-account Nazareth. And He chose you.

Mary, upon hearing Elizabeth’s greeting, upon being reminded that Mary did indeed believe what was spoken to her by the Lord (Luke 1:45), Mary unleashes a verbal joy that has captured generation after generation of believers. The Magnificat, the Song of Mary, is an aria of joy, a hymn of deep awareness of who God is, and what His ministry will mean for the seemingly forgotten. Elizabeth is her original audience but you have heard this song. A great many of you have memorized it and all of you have sung it yourself and in doing so you have been filled with the Holy Spirit. The Magnificat is the church’s song. What Mary sings you sing. Her words describe *your* faith and what it is *you* believe. Right there, in that place, in the Hill County of Judah, in the house of Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary are the beginning of Christ’s church. Joy and song and worship and humility and hope and thanksgiving – it has been ongoing ever since.

We are the lowly who are not forgotten. Christ adopted a lowliness that we have never known. He humbled Himself and was obedient unto death, even death upon a cross. We rightly call ourselves Christ’s servants, but He has served us in a way that we could never reciprocate. He

took our shame. He took our filth. He took our wretchedness. He took our death. God sent a Savior. God sent One who would intervene. Only this Christ can save you. He has done it. Bleeding, suffering out of sheer love for the lost, paying the debt that must be paid. God said that sin *had to be* punished, *had to be* atoned for, *had to be* paid in full and there He is – the Son of God dying on the cross. It is finished! Christ is the end of the law (Romans 1:10). His life is the law fulfilled and enacted and perfected and completed. We are redeemed. And that Savior is with us. He is present in this place; we are heirs of Mary and Elizabeth. Joy is in this holy house. Imagine if one of our “old women” became pregnant. Would we celebrate? Would we be filled with wonder and laughter and joy? Would a spring be in our spiritual step as we began looking to whatever it is that God was doing among us? It has already happened. Elizabeth is her name. We know what God has done. He died and rose again.