

From the Sublime to the Magnificent
Sunday, Dec. 20, 2009 – Fourth Sunday in Advent
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Scripture: Luke 1:39-45, 46-55

It's hard to believe it is already the fourth Sunday in Advent! In just a few days, we will be back here for the Christmas Eve service and then, only a few hours later, it will be Christmas.

The tension between the commercial and the religious Christmases seems more pronounced than ever. Thanks to the commercial hostile takeover of the season, Christmas decorations in the stores make their appearance even before Halloween. But then, when the real season gets here, it's almost over before we know it. The commercial Christmas has diluted the richness of the shorter, more traditional approach to the season. And then, here we are, almost at the bottom of our cup of Christmas egg nog.

Perhaps that is just me, perhaps my participation in our mission trip to Guatemala got me off track. I hope so. I hope you have had more time to savor the season. I hope you have been able to tune out the world and tune in to the holy. I hope for you that Advent hasn't been eclipsed by the daily reports about the give-and-take of healthcare reform in Washington, the week-by-week decline of the Carolina Panthers or the question of whether the headquarters of Bank of America would remain in Charlotte.

Someone once described the last Sunday in Advent as that "last long breath before the birth of Christmas." That's a great metaphor. It reminds us to breathe deeply, especially in these last few days, when some of us may feel more like we hyperventilate, with all our appointments, shopping lists, travel plans, parties and the such. By contrast, I hope we can all take in that long breath, hold it for just a moment – and let it go slowly.

Today's reading in Luke may help us take that much-needed, long, deep breath before Christmas.

With the New Year in the church calendar, the weekly lectionary of scripture readings shifted to the Gospel of Luke. Of the four gospels, Luke pays particular attention to the poor and the powerless, at least by the world's standards. This week's lesson is a good example, though, that those whom the world may see as poor and powerless are often those closest to God.

I divided today's passage from Luke into two readings. They are intended to go together, but they function like a brief two-act play with distinct, even contrasting parts.

In the first part, we join two women of low estate, cousins who share a secret and we experience the quiet intimacy of how they deal with the wondrous circumstances in which they are suddenly caught up. The second part, known as the Magnificat, is celebrated as one of the great praise songs of scripture. It relates to the first part in some ways, but it also can stand alone as beautiful and heart-felt triumph to our God.

We might call this short play, "From the Sublime to the Magnificent."

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We begin with the sublime. "Sublime" is one of those old fashion words that modern speech has cast aside. It conveys a quality of being fine and pure, honorable and even spiritual. It can also describe the process of refining or converting something into an elevated or more lofty state.

There is something sublime, something fine and pure about the meeting of Mary and her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth would bear John the Baptist, who proclaimed Christ's coming. Mary, the Christ child. It's easy, in a way, to disassociate ourselves from Mary, to forget that she really was a regular woman of lowly estate. We might tend to think that we can't relate to her journey or that her family experience had to be so vastly different than our own.

But this story of Mary traveling to see her cousin tells us otherwise. Mary may have welcomed the chance to get away. After all, she was with a child but not of her husband. One can only imagine what Joseph might have been thinking or saying. Why not visit family out of town for a while, take some time to try to figure out what in the world was going on in her life.

Surely Mary looked forward to seeing her cousin, whose home was a four-day journey away. In addition to their family bond, these two women must have shared a special solidarity. Yes, both were expecting but both in some pretty unusual circumstances. Mary, pregnant yet a virgin. Elizabeth, her older cousin, past normal child-bearing years, but suddenly blessed with a child late in life. Mary and Elizabeth had a lot to talk about and the time to think things through together, just what two sisters, close friends or cousins would do in any era.

So, in all these ways, this story isn't that far from our own lives.

On the other hand, there are clues that something else is going on.

Luke is the only gospel writer to interweave these two birth narratives. This reunion has been called the meeting of the mothers of the messenger and message. Not your every day family reunion.

God is up to something, choosing these two unknown women that the world would otherwise forget to bear children that would change history. In choosing Mary and Elizabeth, God provides a glimpse of God's sometimes topsy-turvy ways.

God also shows a sense of humor, a refreshing flash of the comically ridiculous amidst all this world-changing action. And it's something we men can't fully appreciate. As soon as they see each other, these two women aren't visited again by angels or armies. The skies don't part. The earth doesn't quake. No, scripture says that when Elizabeth first heard Mary's voice, John the Baptist 'leaped' in Elizabeth's womb. Women who have carried children know what John the Baptist really did was give Elizabeth a good kick. One commentator called this John the Baptist's "first prophecy." John the Baptist seems to have been as excitable in the womb as he was out of it.

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With this brief inside joke, the sublime part of our two-act play comes to an end. There in verse 45, it's as if the curtain falls, even if but for a moment. Then, like the opening scene after intermission on Broadway, the second act opens with one of the best known songs in all of scripture.

Mary's song of praise and thanksgiving is one of three musical tributes Luke includes in this portion of his gospel. It is a psalm modeled after the song of Hannah in First Samuel. While it follows a formal style of poetry, its sincerity reminds us of another woman's genuine reaction to the news of her unexpected pregnancy, Sarah, who laughed giddily.

The song is known as the Magnificat after Mary's use of the word 'magnify' in the opening line. The text reads, "My soul magnifies the Lord ..." but what Mary is really expressing is her desire to hold the Lord in highest honor and exaltation for this thing that God has done for her. God has indeed done a sublime thing, choosing this humble peasant woman of such deep faith and elevating her to the role of the mother of Emanuel, God with us, in flesh, come as savior to the world.

As a final but vitally important last note, it should never be lost on us that both Mary and Elizabeth are women whom their society has marginalized. Nor should we overlook that Mary's song reflects the hope of the poor and marginalized everywhere, the hope and promise that God lifts up the lowly, even if it means scattering the powerful, that God will fill the hungry with good things, even if it means sending the rich away empty, that God remembers God's servants with mercy and keeps the promises to those who love him.

What better reminder that perhaps, above all else, God asks for humility and walks most closely with those whose hearts are humble.

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So on this last Sunday in Advent, a time when we have one more chance to breathe deeply in our waiting and hoping for God's kingdom to break through, we are given this simple yet profound two-act play. An intimate portrait of two lowly women who share a sublime secret. A tribute in song to a magnificent God who keeps promises and shows mercy.

From all of the hustle and bustle of these last days in Advent, these two women of God invite us to join them in their wonder and their hope. God calls us to wait with them, as we look out on a year that is itself pregnant with possibilities and a future that rests in God's hands.

Here in Charlotte, we hope and pray that new leadership, from city hall to the bank towers, might use their influence to effect change for the Marys and Elizabeths of north and east Charlotte as well as those in Ballentyne and Eastover. We hope and pray that whatever new normal emerges for our economy, it is kinder and gentler, more equitable and more patient in its pursuit of the right kind of capitalism.

We hope and pray for a deeper sense of justice and outrage where it is due, as when an elected official publicly insults another with a hate-filled slur and thinks nothing of it. We hope and pray for our church, as it continues its many ministries and begins new ventures that can build bridges across color and race and ethnicity, in God's name. We hope and pray for those who are ill, whether of mind, body or spirit, that their suffering might be short and their sense of belonging to the Lord unshaken.

Perhaps most of all, this Advent, we hope for hope itself, the assurance that God is with us now in the Holy Spirit and will come again.

“It’s exactly what God promised,” reads one translation of Mary’s song, “beginning with Abraham and right up to now.”
So let it be.

O come, o come, Emanuel.

Amen.