

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

by Rev. Emily Chapman

December 13, 2009

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street

Houston, Texas 77004-6917

713-528-0527

www.stpaulshouston.org

Lectionary Texts:

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:47-55; Hebrews 10:5-10; and Luke 1:39-45

Luke 1:39-55

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 leaped 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 leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

⁴⁶And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

I've spent months trying to spare you all from this terrible fate, but the time has come. My preaching professor's name is Richard Lischer, and when I was in his class, he had something called "Lischer's Laws" that came up in lecture from time to time. One of Lischer's Laws went like this: the church that gives its pastor a trip to the Holy Land, pays twice. Any pastor that returns from the Holy Land is bound to come home with an arsenal of sermons based on what they saw. I've tried valiantly not to subject you to an entire autumn of sermons based on geographic locations.

But now I just have to paint a little picture of Nazareth, the little town where Mary and Joseph lived. Nazareth is not very far from Bethlehem if you just look on a map, but the journey is somewhat mountainous and long because Nazareth is nowhere near a major road. While it's a larger city now, it was barely a dot on the map in Mary and Joseph's day. Why would Mary and Joseph's families have chosen to live there? It's often speculated that Joseph lived there because there wasn't enough work in Bethlehem. Evidence shows that to be untrue. There are other theories, but all fall short, except one. They lived in Nazareth because they wanted to be Jewish.

Judah was under Roman control at the time, and the Romans were not big fans of Judaism, as it made people more faithful to God than they were to Rome. Caesar and his government did all they could do to pull people away from their religion toward Roman civic life. So, the day we visited Nazareth, before we went there, we visited Caesarea Maritime, a beautiful city that Herod had built on the Mediterranean Sea. Our teacher joked that it was Rome away from Rome for government officials. And it was a site to behold. There is a giant theater, horse race tracks, a stunning reception area right on the water, with the remains of the beautiful columns and mosaics that were indicative of Roman architecture. It was and is a magnificent site, a place where anyone would want to spend some time — in the ocean or at the theater or one of the many other entertainments available.

Now I was traveling with 25 pastors, and all of us talked about how we would probably want to hang out there even if it meant renouncing our faith. We were joking of course, but the reality is that it was by far the most beautiful place we had seen so far. A refreshing break from crowded Jerusalem and the dusty byways we had traveled. If I could choose, I would rather live there, or in one of the other modern cities that Herod controlled. I would not want to be in Nazareth. But Joseph and Mary chose to be there instead of in Joseph's home town of Bethlehem. Bethlehem was becoming more like Rome. So if you were a Jew at this time and you did not want to have to be more loyal to Caesar than to God, often you moved to a place where you could practice your Judaism.

These families chose to live in a place where they could observe God's law over Caesar's. Mary got up every morning to say her prayers, to prepare breakfast, making sure that all the dietary laws were followed, making sure meat and dairy were not served together, making sure her dress was in keeping with Levitical law, saying prayers of thankfulness throughout the day, living the life of a first-century Jew and of millions of Jews before and since.

Often these laws are treated as, at best, admirable but impractical and at worst, pathetically out of touch, outdated, even silly. With all the issues in the world, who cares if one is wearing clothing of two different threads or if cheese has touched a plate that is to be used for meat? These laws, though they are in our holy scripture, are nearly always dismissed as absurd.

Yet, it seems to me that it was only because Mary had practiced this way every day of her life that she was ready and able to hear and respond to God. As I sat on a hillside overlooking Nazareth this fall and we read the Magnificat, this beautiful song of Mary that we have sung this morning, I could not help but wonder what enabled this teenage girl to respond to God so faithfully, so profoundly. Our daily practices shape our faith in a way that nothing else can. While we may not all concern ourselves with Levitical law too often, we all need daily Christian practices to sustain our faith and prepare our hearts for Jesus. Mary lived a life of preparation, every single day – not just on days she went to church or on the days she felt like it. Every day she spent preparing her heart to respond to God and welcome the Messiah. She lived every day as though it were Advent. No matter how different it made her from surrounding culture, no matter how absurd she looked, Mary was faithful to God's law. So when God came to give her this crazy message, rather than resisting God or thinking she was having a hallucination or anything else, she responded in the only way humans can respond to an encounter with God. She worshiped.

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.”

Talk about absurdity! Mary is singing a song about a new world coming, about the redemption of all Israel. This word is proclaimed not by archangels or high

priests or rulers or even ordained preachers, but from these two marginalized, pregnant women, one of them young, unmarried, poor, and isolated and the other far beyond the age to conceive a child. These two women sing and share blessings and laugh. It is an odd and joyful story. Our God continues to show that the best things are the things that look absurd to the untrained eye.

Mary, a thoroughly marginal person in her culture, proclaims a new world, an upside down and inside out world in which the mighty are brought down and the lowly lifted up, a world we get a glimpse of in the choice of Mary as the bearer of the Messiah. Mary's song can be interpreted sourly, as an angry protest; preachers use it to rail against oppressive structures and, admittedly, that is often what I want to do with it.

Yet this Sunday, when we remember Mary, we are called to something different all together. This is a time for bold and joyful praise that looks absurd to the untrained eye. This is a time for praising in the face of overwhelming burdens, for laughing and celebrating regardless of circumstances. Because God is coming, incarnate on earth to subvert the powers that be, to lift up the lowly and to scatter the proud. This song is the inspiration for the "Feast of Fools," a Christian traditional festival that actually acted out the Magnificat in a ridiculous folly showcasing the absurdity of this moment in Christian life. The monks would wear their vestments inside out and hold their prayer books upside down, the people would wear glasses with orange peels in them instead of lenses, and would chant gibberish rather than proper liturgy, there was cross-dressing, there were animals brought into the church, all mocking our traditional human pretensions about the way church should be and how God worked. All this because of the strange and topsy-turvy news of the Gospel proclaimed first by a pregnant teenager laughing and singing, and a God who enters the world in a manger because there is no room at the inn.