

Sermon
Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 19, 2021

Luke 1: 39-45

Two women, pregnant; one older, one younger, one from town, one from a lonely rural village, one married, for a long time, and one not yet married. One family lineage is traced from the mother's side, one from the father's. In both circumstances God intervenes in their lives through the visit of an angel. Life is turned upside down! What is ordinary becomes great! What the world calls great becomes nothing! Nobodies become agents of the breaking in of God. God is great, beyond cosmic.....God comes to us as a helpless infant. But I rush ahead....

I want you to imagine a "V" shape, but upside down. Maybe a tent, or A-frame is a better image. At the widest part, at the bottom, is the message of the first Sunday of Advent. A quarter of the way up is the second Sunday, the third and fourth Sundays nearer the point of the "tent". The apex, the pinnacle is Christmas.

Advent begins with the big stuff, cosmic! Heaven and Earth will pass away etc. It's unimaginable, overwhelming, frightening. Frequently called Apocalyptic, it is a great revealing as we heard from Glenn three weeks ago. It sometimes feels like everything we live with now fits the picture. We wait, watch, and hope in this time of revealing on our earth, among humankind. From Luke; "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea

and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” This tumultuous message has the potential to instill in us sight great fear and despair. And yet in the reading and in this time of Advent, the message is one of hope, it is a time to “stand up and raise your heads for your redemption is drawing near.” It is a message of now and of yet to come. It is a time of cosmic, deep revealing, of turning ...and hope.

The Second Sunday of Advent the gospel narrows in from the cosmic to the earth's regions of Judea, Galilee, Ituraea, Trachonitis and Abilene. Those in power believe their power has divine authority – there is no ear for a message from the God of Israel as they already believe they have it. Their might is right! John the Baptist, however, distressing these elite power mongers, was busy traveling and preaching a different message around the region of the Jordan. He is a grown man. His mission; announcing the One who will follow him. His message is loud and clear, repent, turn from your ways. “He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

The Third Sunday of Advent the scope narrows further. John engages people in the crowds, he answers questions. He helps them understand their sin and helps them repent, turn in their ways. “Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.’ Soldiers also asked him, ‘And we, what should we do?’ He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.’” He brings them good news; there is one coming, one more powerful

than I. John has conversations with people that ask the questions – How do I do what I do differently? How do I repent? How do I do a 180 turn in my ways?

Today, on this fourth Sunday of Advent the scope narrows further. We have two named women, Mary and Elizabeth. They're really nobodies according to the social structures of the day. Elizabeth, as a woman unable to conceive and bear children, would have even less status. Mary, a peasant teen from the poor back country is unmarried and pregnant. Both women would be shunned and shamed for not being "proper." Life would be hard for these women and in these circumstances even harder. Women — so often overlooked or ignored both in society at large and in biblical story — have the only speaking roles in today's scenario. As in the weeks before, though, God's revelation, God's in breaking deepens and comes ever closer to us.

Just before our reading in Luke today is Mary's encounter with the angel Gabriel. She is with child, a very special child, the Son of God. She has said to Gabriel, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Plus she's been told that Elizabeth, her relative, is also pregnant and surprisingly so for she had been unable to conceive a child and is now way past being a young woman, and going to have a baby. In the first part of today's reading Mary is quickly on her way to see Elizabeth, her pregnant cousin. What incredible news to share with one another!

God is already at work to overturn the world's structures and expectations. The focus narrows from cosmic, regional, local crowds, to Mary and Elizabeth, two lowly and shamed ones through whom God has chosen to begin the transformation of the world. Everything is turning upside down.

Mary, running down the street, bounds into the house of Zechariah and Elizabeth! Imagine, as an excited and happy young woman she might have immediately called out, “Hi Elizabeth, I’m here! It’s me Mary!”

And Elizabeth’s hands may have immediately gone to her belly as the “child leaps in her womb”! What wonder! Yet unborn, John acknowledges Mary’s presence and the significance of the baby she is carrying. Already this unborn child points to the coming one, the one greater than he.

And Elizabeth, rushing forward to embrace her young cousin and “filled with the Holy Spirit” cries loudly, before Mary can say another word (maybe in the same tones as her son will 30 years later), “Mary, you’re pregnant! You are blessed as is the baby you are carrying.” Furthermore, through the Spirit she knows who Mary’s child will be, for she calls Mary “the mother of my Lord.” Her prophecy will soon be fulfilled when her own son, John prepares the way of the Lord called Jesus.

Her blessing of Mary is one that will continue in the gospel of Luke. We heard it, read it earlier, from Mary, herself in the Song of Mary or Magnificat, blessing will come from Zechariah, Elizabeth’s husband and later, old Simeon in the temple. All praising God for what God is doing at this moment in history, and generations present and future will praise Mary and her child. It recognizes that those who are privileged to be instruments of God’s saving work have been richly blessed. Mary is also blessed by Elizabeth for her deep and fearless faith in God, her confident, youthful ability to say “yes” to God.

By greeting Mary with honor, Elizabeth turns upside down social expectations. Mary is an unmarried pregnant woman. She might expect judgment, shame, even ostracism from her older kinswoman. Yet Elizabeth knows from her own experience the cost of being shamed and excluded. In her culture a woman's primary purpose in life was to bear children, so as an elderly infertile wife she had endured a lifetime of being treated as a failure. Her response to her miraculous pregnancy emphasizes that God's grace has reversed her social status: "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people" (Luke 1:25). At long last, in her old age, she is an honorable married woman, pregnant with her husband's son.

Elizabeth continues the pattern of social reversal by opening her arms and her home to a relative, a young, unmarried woman, whom her neighbors would expect her to reject. Instead of shaming Mary though, she welcomes, blesses, and celebrates her, treating her as more honorable than herself. Thus the pregnancy that might have brought Mary shame brings joy and honor instead. When Elizabeth welcomes Mary, she practices the same kind of inclusive love that Jesus will show to prostitutes and sinners. She sees beyond the shameful of Mary's situation to the reality of God's love at work among those whom society rejects and excludes.

As Luke has written, Mary follows with her song, which we read together as the psalm. In it Mary captures the radical in breaking of God into humankind through history and generations.

Advent, we wait with hope, with joy, peace and love, as hard as that may be some days when there is so much that seems to justify our fear. But God reveals to us that it is in

the unlikely, the vulnerable, the less than perfect where we will find God, where God comes to us. It is not through the rulers of the lands, the Herods, the Emperor Tiberius, or Lysanius that God come to the people. John the Baptist, didn't tell tax collectors and soldiers to change their jobs, he just told them to do it honestly, without greed and fear. Elizabeth and Mary, marginalized, women at the edge of society, not good enough, are chosen to participate profoundly and intimately in the revealing of God in the midst of a broken humanity.

God who acts and loves cosmically, globally, locally and personally, through all time, again and again and everyday comes into our world, into our lives, mine and yours. Our time of Advent waiting is almost finished, but not quite. At the apex of our tent, our upside down "V" is the birth of vulnerable, helpless baby, in a stable, in a strange place far from home. The in breaking of God into our world becomes even more radical than we can ever really seem to grasp. God turns the expected on its head.

May we, like Elizabeth and Mary, trust that God is coming to save and free us from what binds us, what holds us back. May we, like them, give thanks that God has taken away our shame and then respond to God's love by welcoming the vulnerable and shame-filled. May we, like them, become a community that supports one another as we hope and wait.

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Amen, Come Lord Jesus

