

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Fourth Sunday in Advent
20 December 2015

Scripture readings:

Micah 5:2-5a Psalm 80:1-7 Hebrews 10:5-10 Luke 1:39-55

You can be sure the pope would agree with the last words we just sang: *"And the lowly are his choice."* I think that we all understand that the pope is very, very much interested - as we all should be - in the issues of justice, the lowly, the humble, the poor, the needy, those who struggle in this life in ways that we sometimes find hard to imagine ourselves. And so it is we pause on this fourth Sunday in Advent to think primarily about Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary, a woman. I must confess - and there are Lutherans here who will know what I mean by this - Mary was often understood by some Protestants as a bad word almost because although a biblical figure and although Lutherans stand on scripture alone, only Catholics name their churches "St. Mary's" and we didn't do that. I'll bet you'd look hard to find five Lutheran churches in the United States named "St. Mary's." Well, she was not Italian and she was not Catholic. Not that anything is wrong with either of those categories, but it was to some of the people I grew up with a sort of war cry. She's worth reclaiming, she's worth thinking about, and she's worth more than one Sunday in Advent, I believe. My problem with Jesus... Did you hear that? He's got a problem with Jesus! My problem with Jesus is that the Church makes Jesus into God, and when we do that with that person it becomes impossible for me to identify with him. *"Like us in all things except sin."* Well, guess what: a huge piece of my identity is my sinful nature. Don't we start by saying that we are by nature sinful and unclean, thereby by nature unlike what the Church says about Jesus. So how can he be a model for me? It's a fair question, and there are movements in the Church today, particularly in the Western Church, particularly in the Roman Church, to sanctify Mary and elevate her status in the understanding of the Church as a co-redemptrix, as a person who along with Jesus is responsible for the salvation and redemption of the world.

I like what the Eastern Church, the Orthodox Church does with Mary because they understand her from the get-go as a daughter of Adam. You know what that means. *"Blessed be the time that apple taken was. Therefore we must sing and sing. Deo gratias."* That's a medieval hymn. You'll find it in Benjamin Britten's *Ceremony of the Carols*. Blessed be the time that Eve took the apple because if she hadn't done that we wouldn't have a savior. So the Eastern Church is happy to retain an idea about Mary as a daughter of Adam, as a sinner. But they also have a theological idea called *theosis* which means that she was the first human being who because of her belief in her holiness, etc. became taken up into the godhead as a human being. Well now, that leaves the door open for you and me. I know we're late getting started in our holiness, aren't we. I don't think I could live up to those standards, and I doubt that anybody can. But the point is the Eastern Church, it seems to me, preserves an idea, a theology about Mary which makes her a possible model for human beings because of how she relates to her son. They had a real relationship, those two. And Jesus was not very nice to her at times either. When his disciples go to him and say, *"Your mother and brothers and sisters are looking for you,"* and he says, *"Who are my mother and brothers and sisters?"* That couldn't have felt good. Like any other mother, she wanted her son to grow up to be a lawyer, a doctor, and he was running around telling the truth to people and getting into trouble with the authorities. So it was a challenging relationship at best.

We don't know a whole lot about Mary, but all of this is a good possibility for us to keep her as an exemplary human being rather than a goddess because as an exemplary human being she can be appropriated by us as a useful example. Consequently I'm not heavily invested in the fact that we have these birth narratives about her giving birth to Jesus as a virgin. I don't need that virginity in my current thinking to make the special nature of Jesus special. Sorry, I don't need it. I understand, and I think you do too, where that comes from because the birth narratives are added to the Gospel story later in history as an attempt to prove how special Jesus was. If he was that special, something special had to happen when he was born, and you know how it unfolds.

But let's just look at what we heard this morning. In the Gospel text we have two women: one too old to be a mother, Elizabeth who's pregnant. And she encounters this visit from Mary who may be too young to be pregnant, by our standards. And the older woman says, "*Oh my goodness, you have someone very special inside of your body. You have my Lord and my Savior.*" But she knows this because the child in her own womb leaps for joy at the encounter.

There are wonderful Renaissance paintings of Jesus and John his cousin sort of looking out of their mothers' wombs, looking for the world like kangaroos out of pouches waving at each other. There is a splendid Northern Renaissance painting in The Cloisters in New York where Mary and Elizabeth are encountering each other and each has her hand on the swollen abdomen of the other. I'm very fond of that painting because it shows you what Northern Renaissance era maternity clothing was like. Their dresses are split down the side with a sort of shoelace going through it so it could spread open.

But there is purpose for us in pausing to consider this encounter today before we get to all the hoo-ha of Christmas on Thursday. Two women, both inappropriately pregnant, acknowledging that the human being inside of them, each of them acknowledging in the other the possibility of godly presence and holiness. Now I don't think that's a model or an example that is in any way out of date even today. Could it be that this text is an instruction for us to understand that human beings who are bearing children bear in themselves - all of them - the possibility for an expression in flesh of the divine? Could it be that this moment in scripture invites us to believe that every human being contains in herself and in himself the possibility of being understood as an embodiment of the divine mystery and the divine message of love for all people? What is it about Jesus that comes to make him so special to us? Well, it comes after he is born, after he grows up and when he takes on the entire religious and political establishment of his day and says to people - now get this - a couple of simple things: God isn't angry at you and you can't do a darn thing to make God happier than she already is. Now how much of religion has been based on those two premises - that God is furious and that human beings can do something to "jollificate" the Almighty. *[laughter]* Yeah, I made that word up.

All of the religious institutions in Jesus' day are founded on the fact that "*These are the rules. You break them, God's angry. This is what you do to make God happy.*" The Church, the religious organization, is the middle man so they scrape off the top enough resources to keep the organization alive and working. Jesus comes along and is born with an aunt and a cousin and a mother who have met and said in today's Gospel, "*What you have inside of you is holy.*" And Jesus was born to a mother and a father and into a world where somewhere in the middle of that religious mess of an institution they were able to communicate to this child that he was favored by God. Is there anything that prevents any one of us from communicating that very same message to any other infant born in the world today - that you, this child, are favored by God for no other reason than being here. Not because your mother was a virgin, but because we believe God loves you, and the way you will understand that and the only way that infant can understand that is if the adults around that infant love that child. We know the experiments have been done: two groups of babies, one was given the same thing that the other group was given apart from love. The experiment was stopped. Love was necessary to life.

So I'm highly invested in the business of keeping Mary a human being and an exemplary human being, meaning a sinner, meaning flawed, but also meaning a pregnant woman who before partition believed that what she carried in her own flesh was God's gift to her and was holy. She had zilch, she was poor, she was humble, and she understood that there was nothing that prevented her from believing that her child was God's child. We just used the words of the Magnificat which are used at every evensong, every evening prayer service in Christendom. She says, "*My souls magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*" There's no language here or self-understanding here of Queen of Heaven, Queen of Angels. None of that! The lowly servant, a poor woman. "*Surely from now on all*

generations will call me blessed because I understand my child to be holy. The Mighty One has done great things for me.” Could it be that she understood her impregnation was an act of God perhaps communicated through another human being? Is that so tough? *“The Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is that God. His mercy is for those who love him at any time and any place. He has shown strength, he has scattered those who are proud and arrogant. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones.”* Are you getting a sense that this is radical theology? That this is seditious? *“He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry, sent the rich away, helped Israel because God remembers God’s mercy.”*

We’re getting ready to celebrate Christmas and Christmas, of course, is intimately tied up with this business of Jesus and Mary and the baby and the manger and the angels and the shepherds and the wise men. My guess is nobody knew when Jesus was born and nothing happened other than a woman had a child out of wedlock and loved the child. Because the child was loved by the lowly handmaiden of God, the woman who acknowledged the source of her being and the gift she was given as divine, that child grew up to believe in the God she believed in: who was a loving mother, a loving father, a loving parent, God’s own self who was not angry with his children and who needed nothing to be happy other than the child to whom he and she had given birth. Can you believe that God is as happy with you as this lowly fourteen, sixteen-year-old Jewish girl was with the baby that she had out of wedlock, and I’m willing to posit from a man she didn’t know or remember.

If we cheated Christmas by making it into a birthday party for a magical event that’s two thousand years old, we run the risk of making Christmas completely irrelevant - completely! Because when the Church runs out of members and Lutheranism has dried up and Presbyterianism has dried up and Episcopalianism has dried up and the secular world is becoming...what will it matter? The one thing I’m convinced that *will* matter is the love of one human being for another, and that will transcend all prejudices, all religious systems, all armies, all navies, all technology, all cell phones, all recording devices. It will transcend all of that, and the reality is that we cannot, friends, be here ourselves without having been loved.

Christmas becomes relevant, it seems to me, when we move from the idea of the nativity - which is fine in and of itself. It’s a part of transmitting the tradition - move from the nativity to the incarnation, the business of believing that God chooses to live in this world not only then but even here and now *and* in the same way which is in human flesh and blood. P.S., *yours!* P.S., your flesh, your blood is the place where God chooses to live in this world today! So we get ready to sing, *“Be born in us today.”*

It’s a radical message. It runs a real risk of being cheapened deeply and broadly but it is our treasure and it is our belief that God is love, God loves whom God creates, God is not angry with us, and God wants to live here and now in you the way Mary and Elizabeth perceived that God lived in them. Let’s keep her a human being. Let’s not forget her. And may the Lutherans name a few more churches after her.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.