

Advent 4, Year C

December 20, 2015

Luke 1:39-56

In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." And Mary remained with her about three months and returned to her home.

Today is the last Sunday of Advent. As we wind up our outward preparations for Christmas -- our last-minute shopping and wrapping, our getting ready for family or friends or however we will spend the day, it is important that we pay attention to our inward preparation, our spiritual preparation. For once we have finished the buying, baking, wrapping, and decorating, all that is left, outwardly, is opening, eating, and cleaning up. There is little **substance** left if Christmas is *only* the **outward** observance, for that is fleeting and evanescent -- the gifts are soon forgotten, the wrappings thrown out, the tree dried up, the food eaten, and the decorations boxed in the closet. There is little left to show that Christmas had any lasting effect. The effects that *will* remain are the **spiritual** gifts and growth which we receive, and for that *lasting* effect to occur, we need to prepare in a different way. Outwardly, preparing for Christmas involves a filling up and accumulating: accumulating cards and buying gifts, filling up rooms and closets with boxes and wrappings, filling our ears with Christmas music and our stomachs with fruitcake and cookies and wassail.

But inwardly, spiritually, we are called to prepare by emptying: sweeping out the interior rooms of our hearts to make room for Christ to be born anew within us. And if you have not already been doing this as part of your Advent discipline, there is still time.

Jesus did not come to a full and complete world, but rather to a broken world, hungry for love. His mother Mary did not give birth with even the minimal attentions afforded an expectant mother of the times -- a clean bed and an attendant midwife; she had to lay her child in an animal's feeding trough. Jesus was born into a lowliness, an emptiness: "You, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are *little* among the clan of Judah..." the prophet Micah wrote in our Old Testament lesson. The town in which Jesus was born was, by Roman standards, insignificant; the rude manger unnoticed and humble. Mary proclaims in her song, "My soul magnifies the

Lord, for He has regarded the humble estate of His handmaiden. He has scattered the proud... lifted up the humble..." She is the model of receptivity: emptied, that God might birth God's own Son within her.

In our secular childhood Christmas tradition, Santa asks children if they have been "naughty or nice". It is a question of self-examination – an Advent question. Children become more conscious of their behavior, more self-aware as Christmas Eve approaches.

We need to take a cue from our children in *their* self-examination in preparation for Santa Claus, and prepare our *own* hearts for Christmas. "Let every heart prepare him room." The first step is to admit that we are in **need** of changing our lives. Most of us, if we were honest with ourselves, would have to admit that we have been naughty – at least part of the time. Spreading gossip, harboring anger, exuding a negative spirit all around us as we go about our daily existence. Or perhaps our "naughtiness" takes the form of apathy: rather than getting caught up in the "Ho! Ho! Ho!", we approach this holy season with a "Ho hum." Whatever our individual case, there is room for amendment of our lives. We *need* the grace and love which the Christ Child brings – need him to change us from within.

Mary knows her need – expressed in terms of "lowliness". "My soul magnifies the Lord ... for he has regarded the lowliness of his handmaiden." Mary was *humble*; she recognized her need of God, and so God could fill her with all grace. She was totally open, vulnerable, and receptive. Dwight Moody expressed the deep truth of Mary's song when he said that "God sends no one away empty except those who are full of themselves." St. Augustine wrote concerning the attitude of a Christian, "If you should ask me what are the ways of God, I would tell you that the first is humility, the second is humility, and the third is still humility... The sufficiency of my merit is to know that my merit is not sufficient."

Children, in their wonder and excitement, can teach us a great deal about Christmas -- not because they live in a fantasy world which we adults have outgrown; but rather because they are not so filled with themselves that something Greater than themselves cannot enter in.

The great Spanish mystic John of the Cross explained: "The goods of God, which are beyond all measure, can only be contained in an empty and solitary heart." That's been our task throughout Advent – emptying – and if you have not been about this task of emptying thus far, there is still time. In these final days before Christmas, intentionally set aside time each day for silence and stillness. "How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!" Gaze out the window at the birds, take off your glasses and gaze at the lights of your Christmas tree or at a candle. Read slowly through the Christmas story in Luke's Gospel, and put yourself in the place of Mary.

"...Henceforth all generations will call me Blessed," Mary correctly prophesied. Why? Because she is worthy? No; rather because she was so emptied of self that "he who is mighty" could do "great things" for her.

In these final days of Advent, let us make inside of us a Bethlehem -- cleared of pretense, swept of clutter, obvious in our need -- so that *into* our own emptiness and silence and *unto* our profound need the sanctifying gift of God's Life may be born. AMEN