

Advent 4C 2021 Sermon

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.

At the beginning of Luke's Gospel, we hear the stories of two women who become pregnant in the most surprising, though different, ways. Elizabeth has been barren, unable to conceive; but now, in her old age, she conceives in her womb. (Lk 1:5-24) Elizabeth's relative Mary, on the other hand, is young – probably in her mid-teens – and she is a virgin. Nonetheless, she, too, becomes pregnant. Pregnant AND a virgin, at the same time. (Lk 1:26-38)

Now, to say that those two pregnancies – Elizabeth's and Mary's – were totally *unexpected* is the epitome of understatement!

Indeed, if we read the stories of Jesus' birth in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, we encounter surprise and astonishment at every turn. What **happens** is *never* what was **expected**.

And yet *our celebrations* of Jesus' birth are filled with rich and comforting traditions, repeated and expected, year after year: putting up the tree and decorating, baking Christmas cookies, sending cards, giving and receiving gifts, singing carols, mistletoe and Santa Claus, attending Christmas Eve candlelight services, getting together with family. We *expect* these things at Christmas; and if something *disrupts* these wonderful traditions, it is easy to become distraught, frustrated, or angry.

My friends, if you are like me, you are tired of all the restrictions put in place during this long pandemic. Tired of wearing masks. Tired of waiting for the opportunity to sing in church and to have **un**restricted celebrations in the Parish Hall. Tired of disagreements regarding masks and distancing, quarrels which have divided families and communities and churches and our nation.

There **is** that within us which says, “This *should* be over with by now!” So *strong* is that inner voice that some people convince themselves that it *is* over, and all precautions can be dropped. And yet, *wanting* the pandemic to end does not *make* the pandemic end; does not alter reality. The virus could care less what **we** want; *it* just wants to multiply. And it does so by infecting human beings, making them sick, or even dead.

And so, as we approach another pandemic Christmas, which may, in all probability, upset or even cancel some of our traditions, let me ask: What *defines* Christmas? What is *necessary* for there to be Christmas? Or, put inversely, What are those parts of our Christmas traditions without which it would not be Christmas? Getting together with family? Putting up a Christmas tree? Exchanging gifts? Christmas Eve candlelight communion services?

And, one *more* question for us to ask ourselves: Were any of these wonderful and cherished traditions present at the **first** Christmas, when Mary gave birth to Jesus in an animal stable and laid him in a cow’s feeding trough?

Of course, the answer to that last question is, “No.” There were no members of Joseph’s or Mary’s family present at that birth. There was no Christmas tree, no exchange of beautifully wrapped presents, no candlelight communion service that *first* Christmas. That cold, smelly stable was certainly a far cry from what either Mary or Joseph would have desired or expected as a place for Mary to give birth.

But the birth of the Messiah happened anyway, in that undesired and unexpected place. And the undesired setting of that birth in no way diminished the *meaning* of that birth. Quite the opposite: the birth *exalted* the setting! And 2000 years later, *we* exalt that undesired setting by erecting nativity scenes.

C.S. Lewis wrote, “It seems to me that we often... reject the good that God offers us because, at that moment, we expected some *other* good.”¹ We often reject the good that God offers us because, at that moment, we expected some *other* good.

My friends, I believe that C.S. Lewis is speaking to **us**, as we approach *another* pandemic Christmas. We must not reject the blessings God brings us **this** Christmas simply because we *expect* Christmas to go the way **we want** and *imagine* it to go.

I doubt that Mary would have planned her life the way it unfolded! Certainly, she could never have expected to be impregnated by the Holy Spirit – and when she

was not yet married, which caused people to gossip. John's Gospel even intimates that the rumor that Jesus was an illegitimate child followed him into adulthood. (Jn 8:41) That blessed birth was *not* without its troubles and complications.

When the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary to announce God's intention that she give birth to the Messiah, all **plans** she might have had for her future were thrown off-course. There was no way in the world she could have anticipated what lay before her, were she to say, "Yes." It was all uncharted territory. And yet she said to the angel, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." (Lk 1:38) She let go of all plans and expectations she may have had for her future. She let go of the life **she** had desired, and allowed the life **God** desired *for* her to impregnate her and fill her – body, mind, soul, and spirit. That vulnerable and courageous openness to God make her a model of faithful surrender for us all.

Author Rachel Marie Martin writes: "Sometimes you have to let go of the picture of what you *thought* it would be like and learn to find joy in the story you are actually living."²

My friends, I think that is how **we** must navigate these uncertain, unexpected, unwanted pandemic times. We need to let go of the picture of what we *thought* this Christmas and New Year would be like, and learn to find joy in the story, the Reality, we are *actually* living. **Mary** finds overwhelming joy in the unexpected story *she* is actually living: in today's Gospel, she bursts into song, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit **rejoices** in God my Savior..."

And then, Mary does a strange thing: she speaks in the *past* tense about things that God has yet to accomplish. "[God] 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." *None* of those things has yet happened; they will only come about when the kingdom of Heaven is revealed in all its fullness. Yet, the kingdom of Heaven is **already** *within* her, and she feels its Reality **so** strongly that it is as if, for her, it has already come on earth as it is in heaven, in **all** its fullness. All because she surrendered her own expectations for her life and opened herself to God's grace-filled will.

Author Kristi Nelson writes, "When we release expectation and invite *appreciation*, all the moments of our lives become openings and opportunities."³ When we release expectation and invite *appreciation*, all the moments of our lives become openings and opportunities.

That is what I pray for all of us this *second* pandemic Christmas: that we release our **expectations** of the kind of Christmas we *wanted* and *imagined*, and invite **appreciation** of the Christmas God gives us, in all of its uncertainties. Then,

perhaps, after enjoying the Christmas God gives us, we might sing with Mary, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!”

AMEN

1 C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*, New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1964, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2002, p. 26

2 Rachel Marie Martin, *The Brave Art of Motherhood: Fight Fear, Gain Confidence, and Find Yourself Again*, Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2018

3 Kristi Nelson, from “Word for the Day,” April 29, 2021, Gratefulness.org