

**REJOICING IN OUR SAVIOR
LUKE 1: 39-55; MICAH 5: 2-5A
FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT
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Luke 1: 39-55

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?'⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy.⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'⁴⁶ And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord,⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,⁵⁵ to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

Mary's song: what a beautiful message. The message was not original to Mary. Her words reflected scripture, scripture Mary learned from her parents or from other people of faith. We rejoice in our Savior because one generation cares enough to pass the Good News along to the next.

Mary's song is similar to Hannah's prayer when she dedicated her son Samuel's to the Lord (1 Samuel 2: 1-10). Both women sang about God's promise to bring peace, justice and mercy.

It seems strange that a poor unwed teenage girl would speak so positively about the future, but Mary was filled with more than a growing baby. Mary was filled with the Holy Spirit. We rejoice in our Savior thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit moving in our midst.

Mary sang about the eternal promise of God, a promise that we celebrate at Christmas, but one that has been embraced by people of faith throughout history. God is faithful. God is merciful. God cares for those others have oppressed or forgotten. God cares for us like a shepherd cares for the sheep of his flock. The hope, peace, love and joy we celebrate is the light of Christ that overcomes the darkness of poverty, injustice and evil. We rejoice in our Savior because of the light of Christ.

The prophet Micah spoke of the promise centuries before Mary was born. Micah prophesied about a deliverer who would be born in Bethlehem.

Micah spoke to the people of Judah who struggled to survive after the Northern Kingdom was conquered by Assyria. They were anxious and insecure because of the external threat of invasion, as well the internal threat of corrupt leaders (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, p. 74-76).

Refugees poured into Jerusalem, putting more strain on already scarce resources. The leaders of Judah paid tribute to keep Assyria at bay, a tribute that trickled down to burden the common people who could least afford to pay. Those Micah called the "heads of Jacob and the house of Israel" coveted and seized

fields, oppressed farmers and pushed them off their land. According to Micah, leaders took bribes and generally declared “war against those who put nothing into their mouths” (Micah 2: 1-9, 3: 2-11).

Like Mary and Hannah, Micah believed deep down that God “raises up the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap” (1Samuel 2:8) And so Micah, in spite of the all that was going wrong around him, told of one who would come out of Bethlehem and bring peace in the strength of the Lord. Listen to the Word of God from **Micah 5: 2-5a**.

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

Thanks be to God for this Holy Word. Please pray with me. Merciful God, we give thanks for your word and for the faithfulness of those throughout the ages who give us hope when we walk in darkness. Lord, we are humbled by the faithfulness of Hannah, Mary, Micah and others who spread the light of your salvation in Jesus Christ. We are humbled by the notion that you want us to speak of such things today. Do you really want us to stand and feed others in the strength of the Lord this Christmas? If so, we ask for your inspiration by the power of the Holy Spirit. Help us rejoice in our Savior by speaking the truth about your love in Jesus Christ. We pray in his name. Amen.

Last week I went to see a Christmas program my daughter-in-law directed. Fifth graders came at 7AM twice a week since September to prepare the show. As the children began to enter the gymnasium, you could feel the excitement. Christmas was drawing near. I had to smile, even when the principal firmly told them that if they messed with the microphone wires one more time, there would be no show.

I felt a similar excitement at our living nativity this weekend. Virginia firmly explained that the characters of a tableau were supposed to remain still. She said that shepherds’ crooks should stay on the ground. Someone observed that asking children to remain still after eating Christmas cookies and drinking lots of hot chocolate probably was a lost cause.

It is easy to rejoice in our Savior when we see the faces of children. Their eyes sparkle. Their faces glow with anticipation. If we are finding it hard to rejoice right now, perhaps we should become more child-like or hang out with children.

In a way, it may have been easier for Elizabeth and Mary to rejoice because they anticipated the birth of their children. There is hope in new life. With a husband who could not speak during her pregnancy, Elizabeth probably yearned for company. Mary’s arrival may have been just what she needed.

Some biblical scholars suggest Mary came to Elizabeth to get confirmation of what Mary heard from the angel (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1, p. 92-94). Others believe it was Mary who affirmed Elizabeth. Perhaps it was a little of both.

I’ve seen that happen on many occasions when people of faith visit each other. The affirmation and confirmation we receive from each other lifts us up. A prayer shawl brings hope. So does a phone call, an email or a card, but there is something about a visit during the good times or the tough times that accomplishes more than we imagine. When two or more are gathered in his name, Christ is present. We

rejoice in our Savior, especially when we come together with people of faith and speak about what we have heard and believe.

Elizabeth and Mary were filled with the Holy Spirit. Because they were willing to be guided by God's Word and Spirit, they became the means by which God came into the world as Jesus Christ. If we are not rejoicing in our Savior this Christmas, I pray that we open ourselves more fully to the Word and work of the Spirit. God is faithful.

What Mary and Elizabeth experienced is a mystery. The birth of Christ is a mystery. Our own experience of God is a mystery. Peter Gomes (The Good Book), chaplain at Harvard, described the scriptures as a mystery – a mystery we are invited to enter and explore, not solve.

If we find it hard to rejoice in our Savior this Christmas, perhaps we need to stop worrying, thinking and trying so hard. Maybe we need to enter into the mystery and meet our Savior in new ways.

As a pastor, I have been blessed to experience or hear about the mystery of God on many different occasions. Someone arrives at the hospital just when they are needed. Words of encouragement are given right at the time someone needs to hear them. An invitation to supper, a kind word, a hug, an offer of a ride, an answer to a call for help – ordinary actions become extraordinary because of the work of the Spirit.

Sometimes it takes courage to act according to what we hear from the Word. "Let it be with me according to your Word," Mary said. Are we willing to make that commitment this Christmas? If we do, I guarantee that we will rejoice in our Savior. God's promises are sure.

During the holidays some families experience tragedy. This was the case for a family in Florida over Thanksgiving (ABC News, 11/27/09). A family member killed three people, including his sister and a 8 year old niece. The little girl's father, a television photographer and a Christian, proclaimed the Good News in the midst of his grief. "My daughter conquered death in Christ," he said. "She is with her Savior, and her mother and I rejoice in that." Like Micah, sometimes we are called to proclaim God's eternal promise of salvation in Christ, even when our current circumstances are dark. We can rejoice in our Savior this Christmas because Christ has come and he will come again.

God used an unwed teenager to bring our Savior into the world. This was not the first time God chose ordinary unlikely people to accomplish extraordinary ministry, nor did Mary accomplish the feat on her own. The angel Gabriel, her fiancé and husband Joseph, her cousin Elizabeth and many others contributed to the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, all according to God's will and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We rejoice in our Savior this Christmas because God continues to use people like you and me to bring the Good News into our own time and place. We are the body of Christ. We are Christ's hands and feet in the real world. We rejoice in our Savior this Christmas because we, like Mary, have a role to play in God's work of salvation. We are called to stand in the strength of the Lord.

Presbyterian minister Michael Lindval, in his book The Good News from Northhaven, told a story about another unwed teenager (Pulpit Resource, December 24, 2006, pp. 54-55). Northhaven was a small town in Minnesota. One Sunday around Thanksgiving, the grandson of elder Angus McDonald was baptized. When the elder asked, "Who stands with this child," the parents and grandparents of Angus III stood proudly.

After the service ended and most people departed, the pastor noticed one woman remained. She was dressed in what Lindval described as "Salvation Army style." She usually sat in the back pew. He greeted her, and after an awkward silence, she said, "Tina has had a baby, and, well, the baby ought to be baptized, shouldn't it?"

The pastor suggested that Tina and her husband might visit with him and discuss the matter. "*Tina has no husband,*" the mother said. "*She was confirmed in this congregation, came to the youth group. But then she got involved with this older boy. And then she got pregnant. She is only eighteen.*"

When the pastor took the request to the Session, there were questions. Who was the father? How could they be sure she would take the promises to rear the child in the faith seriously? After deliberation, the Session approved the baptism for the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

When the fourth Sunday of Advent came, the church was filled, as it always was just before Christmas...They went through the service, singing the usual Advent hymns...then they got to the time for baptism. The pastor announced, "And now would those to be presented for baptism please come forward."

An elder of the church stood and read off a 3 by 5 card, "Tina Corey presents her son, James, for baptism..." Tina got up from where she was seated and came down to the front, holding two-month-old James in her arms. A blue pacifier was stuck in his mouth...Tina seemed so young and so alone...As she stood they could not help but think of another mother and another baby, young, alone, long ago...

Then the pastor came to the time in the service when he asked, "Who stands with this child?" The pastor looked out in the congregation and watched Tina's mother hesitantly stand and walk somewhat awkwardly toward Tina and her grandson. The pastor prepared to continue with the service when he became aware of movement...A couple of elders in the church stood up. Others stood with them. Tina's sixth grade Sunday school teacher stood up. A new young couple in the church rose to their feet. Then, to the astonishment of the pastor, the whole congregation stood and began moving forward to surround Tina and her child.

Tina was crying. Her mother was gripping the rail, as if she were in a great wind. And perhaps she was. Perhaps it was the wind of the Holy Spirit. Little Jimmy grew peaceful as the water touched his forehead, as if he, too, felt the breeze of peace.

My friends, Christ has come. Christ is coming again. Like Mary, may we be blessed as we spread the Good News. May we bring Christ into the world according to God's will. Let us rejoice in our Savior this Christmas.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Loving God you have called us out of darkness into your marvelous light. We give thanks for the light of hope, peace, love and joy that you offer us in Jesus Christ. We rejoice in our Savior even as we bring our concerns to you.

God our Creator, you made all things good in your wisdom. Help us to be good stewards of what you entrust to our care so that future generations will be blessed as we are blessed. Guide us and guide our

leaders. Help us realize that stewardship is more than an agreement made by leaders in a far-away country. Stewardship is a personal responsibility.

We pray for the church universal and for this congregation. We pray for the churches large and small. Keep this congregation firm in our faith. May the joy of Christ shine brightly through all that we do.

God of all nations, you call us to be a holy nation, God's own people. We pray for our president, members of Congress and for leaders everywhere. May leaders seek your wisdom, pursue your justice and show kindness to those they serve.

We pray for peace. We pray for those who serve you in harm's way here at home and far away. We lift up those serving in danger so that we might celebrate the holidays. Protect our troops and give hope to their families.

Lord, we pray for those who grieve. We pray for Lori and the Trenk family, for Rocky, Evelyn, George, Sid, the Rymes family, Jo Anne and all those who grieve the loss of loved ones this Christmas.

God of mercy, we pray for those who are anxious, ill or otherwise in need of your healing touch. We pray for their families and their care givers. We especially lift up John, Terry and Karen, Mel, Sandy and Sean, Kent and others we name in silent prayer. We entrust them to your care. We pray for those who are worried about finances, job, work and school. We pray for those having difficulties in relationships.

We ask your blessing on Dawn and Michael in their engagement and on Mel and others celebrating birthdays and anniversaries this week. We pray for traveling mercies for those leaving home for the holidays.

We pray all these things in the name of Jesus. Amen.