

Sunday, December 22, 2024
Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year C)

Luke 1.39-55

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1716440039155008>

(Sermon begins at about 18:25)

“Reunions”

Today we come to the end of our Advent journey. Well, not quite the end. That really happens with Jesus’ birth on Christmas. But the end of the readings outlining the various manifestations of Advent, the various nuances of what the Advent journey means for us as God’s beloved children. In this journey, we started off talking about Christ’s second Advent at the end of the ages—his role at the Second Coming. Since then, we have been working our way backward, approaching the time of the first Advent: Jesus’ birth. On the second Sunday of Advent we were introduced to John the Baptist, foretold in ancient prophecies as the one who is a voice crying in the wilderness, “prepare the way of the Lord.” Although we don’t actually get the follow-up in our Advent cycle of readings: the meeting between John and Jesus, when Jesus comes to be baptized. The event that launches Jesus on his public ministry and into his role as Messiah. Effectively, fulfilling John’s role as the one who proclaims the Lord’s coming through his words, as well as through the sacramental act in which God himself proclaims Jesus as his beloved Son.

If you look at most of the accounts of Jesus’ baptism, it could be easy to walk away with the idea that this was the first time Jesus and John had met. For the most part, we don’t have any indication that they actually knew each other before that day. Although, there is one story that indicates otherwise. Today’s Gospel account of what is referred to as the Visitation. As we heard, Mary, pregnant with Jesus, goes to visit Elizabeth. What we learn in the text of the Annunciation, which we heard last week, is that Elizabeth is Mary’s relative—often presumed to be a cousin of some sort—and that Elizabeth is herself pregnant; about six months along. And as is revealed earlier in Luke’s Gospel—although we did not hear that full story, only Zechariah’s prophecy about his son—the child Elizabeth carries in her womb is none other than John the Baptist. So, Jesus and John are relatives.

Upon entering Elizabeth’s home, the child within her womb—the one who will grow up to become John the Baptist, the one who will prepare the way of the Lord—leaps for joy. This being the first meeting between John the Baptist and Jesus. An event that foreshadows their reunion at the Jordan River 30 years in the future. Obviously, at this point, both John and Jesus are fetuses: one six months along and the other barely conceived. As such, they are not able to carry on a conversation. And yet, they are somehow able to communicate through their mothers. Or possibly through a Divine intermediary conveying insights to their mothers. Regardless, these two unborn children essentially engage in their initial conversation. One that will set the stage for their future encounter.

As noted, the first thing that happens upon Mary entering the house is that John leaps for joy in Elizabeth’s womb. There is obviously something about the child growing in Mary’s womb that

the unborn John is able to detect. A presence, an energy, that it seems only John is able to perceive. Perhaps only made possible by some sort of Divine connection between the unborn children. Even so, the unborn John is able to convey to his mother a greater truth about the unborn child Mary carries. “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” At this point, Mary would not even be showing, and yet, Elizabeth knows in the depths of her being that Mary is pregnant. And not just with any child: “And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?” She knows in her inmost being just who this unborn child is. As did her unborn son in her own womb.

Without Mary even saying a word about the circumstances of her conceiving, Elizabeth even knows what transpired between Mary and the archangel. Maybe not verbatim, but certainly the essence. Mary initially expressing reservations. And Mary ultimately having the faith and courage to proclaim “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Lk 1.38). Elizabeth’s insights all summed up in her statement, “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

Now it is Mary’s turn to speak. To respond to the joy expressed by her cousin Elizabeth and the unborn John. To provide some indication of her own understanding of what is happening to her, of what she has committed to. Undoubtedly the result of a lot of reflection on her encounter with the archangel. Mary delivers an eloquent speech, a song, pouring out what is in her thoughts and on her heart. A song not unlike other songs delivered by other women of the past, by Mary’s foremothers in the faith. The Song of Miriam extolling praise for the Hebrews being delivered from slavery upon crossing the Red Sea. The Song of Deborah praising God for Israel’s victory over a Canaanite army. The Song of Hannah foretelling the deliverance of Israel, in part accomplished through her newborn son Samuel who will grow to be a great prophet.

Mary begins with “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.” Recognizing the importance of what God is doing through her for the benefit of humanity. Recognizing the gravity of what she has said “yes” to. Recognizing that she has committed not only to nine months of carrying God’s son to term, but to the years of support and guidance of her child that will follow. Her recognition that she, a lowly peasant girl, will be the mother of the Son of God. That it will be her honor and her responsibility for raising Jesus, for showing the Son of God—the One who will be born fully divine and fully human—just what it means to be human. What an awesome responsibility. What weight she must have felt in that moment. A weight she would carry for the rest of her life.

Mary’s song then takes on a prophetic nature as she outlines some of what her unborn son will accomplish through his life. And little does she know, through his death. She extols the virtues and accomplishments achieved through his mercy, through his strength. A combination that will allow him to see injustice and work to make things right, to make things new. Not least of which is turning the status quo on its head, where the powerful will be taken down and the lowly will be lifted up. Fulfillment of the great reversals foretold by prophets of old. Fulfilling the promises God made to his people from the very beginning, when God established his covenant with Abraham. Promising that he would be their God and they would be his people.

Restoring the people to right relationship with him. Relationship that had become strained over time.

Like the song of Miriam before her, Mary's is a song of liberation. Like the song of Deborah before her, Mary's is a song of victory. Like the song of Hannah before her, Mary's is a song of deliverance. All this wrapped into one. All in fulfillment of the dream, of the promises God has made to his people.

Mary prefaces her prophetic statements with the words, "for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name." Not that what is happening is about her. She doesn't believe that at all. She is but God's servant. Of that, she is well aware. When she proclaims that God has done great things for her, she is using herself as a representative, as a surrogate, as a symbol, for all those who will benefit from what God is doing. How God is acting for all of humanity. How her unborn son will fulfill God's promises to restore the people to right relationship once and for all. And in so doing, bring about their salvation.

In this one, tender scene between cousins, we see the arc of salvation history in its entirety. We witness ancient prophecies being fulfilled. Two cousins, both pregnant. One with the long-awaited Messiah. The One who was coming into the world to set things right and to make all things new. The One who would restore right relationship between God and his people. The One who would bring about the salvation of all humanity. And one of these cousins pregnant with the one who, as foretold in prophecy, would be the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "prepare the way of the Lord." The one who, through the ritual act of baptism, would prompt God's own declaration, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3.17). The public affirmation and confirmation of who Jesus is as God's anointed, as the Messiah.

The reunion of cousins, each playing their part in salvation history. The first encounter of their sons, also cousins, who would each in their own way be instrumental in fulfilling both the prophecies of the long-awaited Messiah and in bringing salvation history to its intended conclusion. This reunion thus being a self-contained image of what Advent is all about.

As we bring our Advent journey to a close, as we prepare for the Advent of our Lord at Christmas in just a few days' time, let us ponder what we have witnessed here today. As we reflect on this family reunion, in all its tenderness, in all its mystery and wonder, may we, like Mary, like Elizabeth, offer praise and thanksgiving for this season and for what it means for us. May we share with Mary in her song: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant . . . for the Mighty One has done great things for me—he has done and will continue to do great things for us—and holy is his name."