

A Joy-filled Wonder

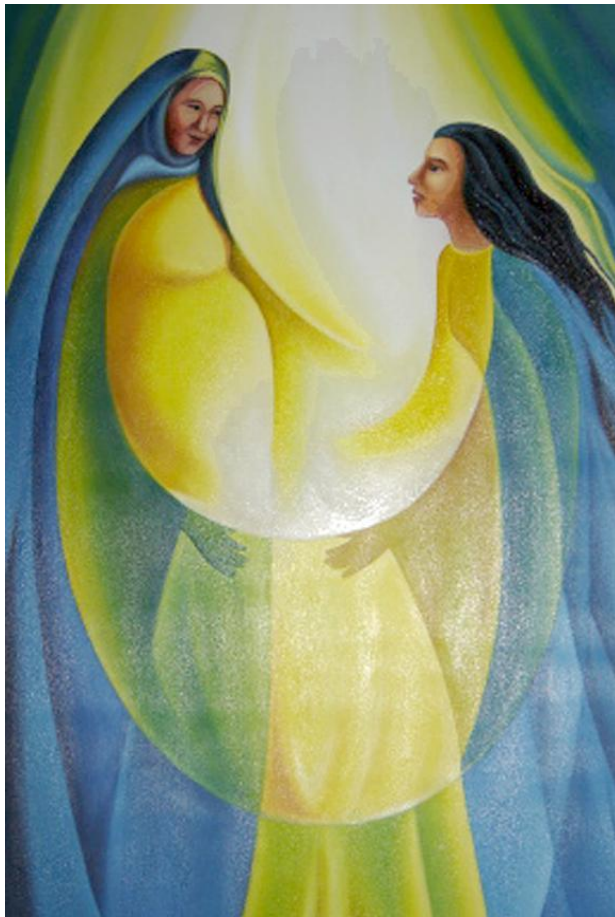
Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Fourth Sunday of Advent - December 19, 2021

Text: Luke 1:39-80

A bit of background for our Gospel reading: Luke is the only Gospel writer who begins the story of Jesus with not one but two pregnant women, both of them unexpectedly and scandalously with child: Elizabeth too old and too barren; Mary too young and too chaste. And they are related -



they are kin. While the rest of the extended family might have been gossiping about Elizabeth's having a child at her age, and the disgrace of unmarried Mary, these two cousins, decades apart in age, connect with each other. Just after the angel tells her she'll give birth to the savior, Mary rushes off to see her cousin, who is already six months pregnant. Her baby will be John, John the Baptist, the prophet who will announce Jesus' arrival to the world. So far so good. What's unclear in the original, ancient versions is who actually said or sang the Magnificat. Some say Mary, some say Elizabeth. Me? I think they sang together, probably holding hands and dancing at the same time. That's why, when we get to that part of the story, we're going to sing it together, just as we practiced it. If the Spirit moves you to grab someone's hand and start dancing, feel free!

Visitation, from Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN.

From the Church of St. Elizabeth in Sitio, El

Salvador.

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah the priest and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she

who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” And they sang, and we sing with them:

My soul proclaims your greatness, O God!
My spirit rejoices in you, my Savior,
because you have looked with favor on my lowliness
and showered your servant with blessing!
From now to the end of time,
all generations will call me blessed,
for they will know the great things you have done for me.
Mighty One! Your name is holy!
In every age, your compassion flows to those who reverence you!
But all who exalted themselves in arrogance
have been scattered by your strength.
You have deposed the mighty from their seats of power,
and have raised the lowly to high places.
Those who suffer hunger, you have filled with good things.
Those who are privileged, you have turned away empty-handed.
You have come to the aid of your people,
in fulfillment of the promise you made to our ancestors—
when you spoke blessing to Sarah and Hagar
and all their descendants, to the utmost generation!

And Mary remained there with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned to her home.

Just in case you didn't notice, let me remind you that six months plus three equal a full-term pregnancy. The likelihood is that Mary stayed until Elizabeth delivered her baby. When she and Joseph settled into that stable in Bethlehem, she knew what childbirth looked like!

Something amazing happened when Mary and Elizabeth met. It was not just that baby John leapt and danced in the womb, not just that Elizabeth sensed that Mary was carrying the Messiah. Not just that two miraculous pregnancies overlapped, one in the first trimester and one just entering the third. Something passed between these two women, one old, the other young. Holiness. Blessing. I imagine them gazing into each other's eyes with a kind of love-filled wonder. “Wow. I see you. I know you. You are God's chosen and anointed one. You are holy. You are whole.”

Holiness is what flows between and among people when they love deeply, when they know each other from a heart space that doesn't need words to understand. Like a mother and daughter, or a family of sisters when they gather. Or a husband and wife sitting together in worship, holding hands. Sharing holiness. Passing blessing between them.

The great thing about passing holiness this way is that it's contagious. Other people see it and want it. They yearn for that heart connection. It's not envy; it's more like a feeling of hunger or even homesickness. And so we sing together, like Mary and Elizabeth. It's one of the most important things people can do, along with praying together. One of these days, trust me, we're going to dance together, too.

Another remarkable thing about this connection between two pregnant women is what they sang and how they sang it. This is an ancient psalm or song of praise. Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel, sang something very like it 1000 years before, when her barrenness was healed and she conceived a child. But it's more than just another praise song. It's a prophecy. Some people call these few verses the gospel in a nutshell. The rest of what Luke wrote about Jesus and the early church is just working out what the song takes for granted - which is what prophecy is.

Here's a little grammar lesson: if you read the original version, you will see something strange about God's actions - not that they're all about justice for the poor and mercy for the powerless; that's what God always does - but that women sing about them as though they've already happened. This is a feature of prophecy throughout the Bible, whether or not the translations show it. It's called "the prophetic perfect." What God promises is such a sure thing, we're going to talk about it in the past tense. You know how it is when you ask someone really reliable to do something absolutely essential? And they say back to you, "Consider it done." Consider it finished already! That is trust. That is confidence. That's how Mary and Elizabeth feel about God.

Of course, when you think about the things they sing about, you can't say they're completely finished. I mean, there are still despots and dictators in power, and people who are dying of hunger, and the wealth gap seems to be growing rather than shrinking. Don't just trust the evidence of your senses, these two women tell us. Trust your heart. Trust the God who has done this marvelous, outlandish, totally awesome and holy thing for us and in us. It's as good as done.

This is the "already/not yet" that Christians talk about sometimes. God's completed and perfected universe has a way of growing inside the world, first invisibly - just as a pregnancy is not seen immediately, and maybe not even sensed by the woman herself; but gradually becomes more and more obvious, until finally the baby is born into the world. And even then there's still a long process of growth and maturing that has to happen.

Here's an example that's close to my heart: the simple truth that I'm standing here today and you do me the courtesy of listening to me. Women were not always so privileged. Parts of the Bible command women to be silent in church and let men do the talking. Even Luke implies that women do best when they just say, "Yes, sir, whatever you say, sir." Jesus *did have* female disciples; they got conveniently forgotten when things were written down. We *do see* a few women serving as teachers and pastors in the New Testament. Their stories were suppressed; that was the message that stuck. It took Presbyterians in this country until 1965 to ordain a woman as

a teaching elder or pastor. Don't feel bad; the Lutherans took another five years. Now we take it for granted.

Here's a story I learned this week: Miriam Therese Winter, who wrote the version of the Magnificat we sang earlier, is a Catholic sister. She wrote a book about Ludmila Javorova, a Moravian from Czechoslovakia who was ordained a priest, secretly, by a progressive bishop. Ludmila, who came from a very devout Catholic family, remembers how, when she was very young, her brothers played church. They were priests and altar boys, but they wouldn't allow her to participate because she was a girl. She ran to her father and begged him to tell her why girls couldn't be "Reverend Fathers." Her father, without skipping a beat, said, "So you can pray for it, and maybe someday it will happen." And it did happen for her, though not without great labor pains.

My point is not to demand that women, or LGBT people, or people of color, or people with disabilities be lifted instantly into positions of authority that were historically denied them. What I'm trying to say is that we can trust God to bring about everything that's been promised: including the overthrow of tyrants, and the comfort to the last and the least. That the hungry will have plenty to eat, and the overfed will be sent away empty. That the blind will see and the deaf hear, and the sick will be healed and the dead will be raised. Consider it done. Only, like pregnancy - and remember, there's no such thing as being "a little bit pregnant," - these things are only gradually becoming visible. We help make them real.

The world is pregnant with salvation, a savior whose work has already been accomplished. Christ's grace is made real every time holiness passes between us and among us. And this is why we continue to pray for peace, and persevere in working for justice, and why we keep coming together to worship and sing and mourn and dance for joy. Ideally, here in worship, the kin-dom, the beloved community, has been made perfect in our midst. We look at one another with eyes of love-filled wonder and say, "Wow. I see you. I know you. You are God's chosen and anointed one. You are holy. You are whole." In God's time, it is already done. In our own time, not quite. And this is why we sing: While we are waiting, come....

Prayers

God, help us, when we look at the world and its woes, to trust that, yes, you've already fixed it! Give us hope and trust to believe the word that says your plan is complete, and we are here to be a part of working it out.

~Even in this season of rejoicing, there are so many who mourn: lives, homes, livelihoods lost in the tornados and storms here and elsewhere in the world. Mounting deaths from a virus we still understand so imperfectly. And the daily tragedies that strike anyone at any time. You, loving God, have promised healing in your good time. May your comfort give us courage and strength to go on praying, singing, worshiping, dancing.

~God of peace, where conflicts rage and where they fester, help calm and balanced voices to prevail. At every border where tensions rise, let understanding and compassion prevail. Here in our own community, may we see people of every race and faith with love-filled eyes.

~Grant safety to those who travel, a healthy caution to families and friends who gather, an end to isolation for those who suffer, healing for those who are ill, comfort for those who mourn. Remember us all in your kin-dom and teach us to pray: Our Father and Mother in heaven...