

"Finding Community"
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade
The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 20, 2009
Scripture: Luke 1:39-55

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Holy God, our hope and strength, by the power of your Spirit, prepare the way in our hearts for the coming of your Word, so that we may see the glorious signs of your promise fulfilled; Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

I remember the first Advent season I served in a church. I was still in seminary – with a year and half before graduation. I was serving as an intern in a church in Delaware. The senior pastor asked me to preach on the fourth Sunday in Advent. I was excited about it then, and felt honored that she would invite me to preach during Advent. Since then – after being in ministry for twelve years – I know that her request was probably more about her need to prepare for Christmas Eve than her trust in me. But...there you go!

The text on which my sermon was based that fourth Sunday in Advent was the one we heard this morning. Having grown up in a pretty much un-churched family, I had never heard a sermon about Mary. And having grown up in a neighborhood made up mostly of Roman Catholic families, I had always envied my friends who got to “be” Mary in Christmas Eve services. When ever I said that out loud, though, my dad would say, “We’re protestant – we don’t ‘do’ Mary!”

However, as I grew up, and read the Bible and Bible commentaries, I truly began to think that we protestants had thrown the baby out with the bathwater when we decided not to ‘do’ Mary. I think that because I came to see Mary as a very real and very human – indeed, stellar – example of what a faith – filled life can be. Mary joined the scores of women in the Bible

who didn’t wait for the world to change to suit them, but who reached out and changed it. I think of Miriam and Rahab, about Ruth and Hannah, about Esther and Deborah and Pharaoh’s daughter, about Dorcas and the Hebrew midwives, about Mary of Magdala and the Syro-Phoenician woman and the woman with a hemorrhage. Personally, I think Mary was a wise choice as Jesus’ mother because I suspect she taught him most of what he knew about engaging 100 percent with life rather than waiting for life to change in some magical way to be safer, better, more just, happier, more fulfilling, more lovable and more loving.

As much as I am grateful when I have the chance to talk about Mary, I need you to know that, except for her immaculate conception, Mary was just like us. As far as I can tell, the only thing which separates Mary from the ordinary run-of-the mill churchgoer like you and me is that she actually “believed” in God’s promises. Do you remember what Elizabeth said when Mary showed up at her door? “...and blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” To be sure, Mary is not the only person in the history of our faith who believed in those promises. But the fact is, she started by believing she was talking with an angel. She believed that there actually *are* angels – or messengers from God. And she believed that God might actually want to send her a message. And while it sounds as though she was a little startled by the message she received, she said yes because she *believed* that God was present and active in the world...and in her life.

Mary put her life on the line because she believed in God’s fulfillment of all God’s promises. She believed that God acted through ordinary people (is there any other kind?) to bless a good creation. Mary put her life on the line when she said yes to God’s request through

the angel. She decided that she wanted her life to count for something and she agreed to participate in God’s fulfillment of God’s desire for creation in a big way.

And then Mary wasted no time after the visit of Gabriel, to go to see Elizabeth. A joy shared is twice the blessing. When I pour the perfume of my delight on you, a great portion of it splashes on me. Joy adds and multiplies as we divide it with others. Telling you what excites me, excites me all over again.

And Mary had something she had to share with Elizabeth. Although likely counted among the “quiet in the land,” Mary could not and would not be silent about this. She would not keep this news to herself. The angel had spoken to her and she must speak to Elizabeth about what she had heard. Since the angel visited her in Elizabeth’s sixth month of pregnancy and she returned home before the birth of John, Mary must have set out immediately after the angel’s visit for the “hill country of Judah.”

While no one can locate the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth with precision, Mary may have been on a hard and rigorous road three to five days, traveling somewhere between 60 and 80 miles. In view of bandits and other hazards on the road, the young Mary’s journey was at the least impetuous and at the most courageous. She was determined to tell Elizabeth her news. She did and, much blessed in the telling of it, lifted her youthful voice in a magnificent song immortalized across the ages.

This season, on the Advent road, let us find others to go with us, to share the good news of Bethlehem. As Elizabeth and Mary were kin, let us choose those who are kindred in spirit as fellow pilgrims on the way. Inspired by the meeting of two “miracle mothers” in the hill country of Judah, may we share with others the miraculous nativity in our hearts. As we come

toward the manger, let us tell each other the good news of God's work of grace in our lives.

Telling our grace stories to one another brings a bonus of blessing. As Elizabeth's child jumped for joy in her womb when Mary crossed the threshold, our hearts escalate over good news from a fellow pilgrim. When you tell me how God spoke to you, I hear God's voice in my soul. When I tell you where God directed me, you feel movement in your life. When we share with each other, our blessings multiply. When we light the candles of one another with the good news of God's gift in Christ, we increase light all around.

The great entertainer Maurice Chevalier was a Christian who believed it was his call in life to cheer up people. "Cheering up people," he said, "is a boomerang activity. It just comes bouncing back at you." Those who bring the sunshine of God's love to others cannot keep it from themselves.

I offer a word of caution as we seek companions for the Bethlehem journey. Choose those with compatible hearts. Don't select those easily distracted by the competing sounds of the season. While an evangelistic spirit is commendable and outreach should not be ignored, it is prudent to journey with those who are open to the truth of what happened in Bethlehem, those who know that it is God in the manger, those not sidetracked by the commercial secularism of the world or the over-sentimentalism of the church. Who goes with us to Bethlehem is important.

You are in the perfect place to choose the right companions for the Bethlehem journey. You are in the church of Jesus Christ where people have heard the story and know what it means. There are plenty of Elizabeths here for your Mary. The joy you have in Christ can be much shared with those who are here.

There's a telling scene in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis where

Lucy says, "Come on then, let's find the others. What a lot we shall have to tell them! And what wonderful adventures we shall have now that we're all in it together."

This place is where we need to be; here we are in it together as we move from Advent toward Christmas. The title of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's classic book says it well – *Life Together*. In that book, Bonhoeffer tells us why we are all in it together, "Our community with one another", he says, "consists solely of what Christ has done for and to both of us."

Christ was born in Bethlehem for both of us, for each of us, for all of us. His birth gives us community. At the manger we are family. Every woman for whom Christ was born is my sister. Every man for whom Christ was born is my brother. You know how, when a baby is born, the whole family gathers around. We meet at the manger as family. In that same book Bonhoeffer says, "The more genuine and the deeper our community becomes the more will everything else between us recede, the more clearly and purely will Jesus Christ and his work become the one and only thing vital between us."

Traveling as family to Bethlehem makes revelation possible. If you want to see God, look at those who know God. Nothing nourishes the faith in a person quite like seeing the evidence of faith in another person.

This is what we anticipate on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, as we continue our journey to Bethlehem. We will hold hands. We will talk to each other. We will listen to each other. We will know Jesus Christ born anew in each of our hearts because in him we find community. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

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