

4th Sunday of Advent
Sermon 12.19.21

Micah 5:2-5

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. ³ 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. ⁴ 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; ⁵ and he shall be the one of peace.

Luke 1:39-55

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 leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² 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 leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." 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 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." (407)

At last, it begins. This thing we've been waiting for: at long last it begins. Advent is a short season, but it spans a lot of time, and moves backwards, as I said on that first week. Beginning with the end of time on the first Sunday, it then drops in the middle for the second and third, when Jesus was grown and just beginning his ministry, and it ends at the beginning, just before his birth. And at last, we're here. "In those days Mary set out and went with great haste..."

It hardly needs explaining, this thing that's finally happening. Hardly, because this story has been with us since *our* beginning, each of ours I bet. Even those who didn't grow up celebrating Christmas as a religious holiday I'll bet know who Mary is, know what is just now happening with her. I bet no one here can remember the first time you ever saw a creche scene, the first time you ever heard of that mysterious star or the angel Gabriel who had just now visited Mary, had just announced to her that she would bear a son.

He would be conceived by the Holy Spirit and would therefore be called son of the Most High. He would be great and of his kingdom there would be no end.

For all this, Mary would go with haste to her kinswoman's house, Elizabeth who was also pregnant, which was also unlikely since Elizabeth was old. Six months further along, Elizabeth's pregnancy was with John, and though for both women this was a first, Elizabeth at least had the wisdom of years to bring to this whole wild disruption, a most unlikely pregnancy, a most unlikely new thing being born into the world.

Young Mary would go to her and stay with her for three months, until the time would come for Elizabeth to give birth. Ever the herald, ever the one to go before, John even in utero would prepare a way for Jesus, John's mother helping Jesus' mother prepare for something that can only hardly be imagined—utter disruption.

That's an essential implication of the so-called virgin birth, by the way—a total disruption, and not just of Mary's life but of all life, all history, a total *interruption*. The immaculate conception, the virgin birth: these aren't to suggest that sex is bad. These strange divine actions: these aren't to suggest that sexual reproduction is a second best to miraculous conception. The takeaway point of Mary's storied virginity isn't that women should from now on aim to be, like Mary, somehow fruitful while also remaining "pure," whatever that means. The takeaway point is that the Messiah would necessarily be born into the world but also transcendent of the world, born into history but not entangled in its many snares—an interruption of the inheritance of so much tragedy, so much intergenerational injustice.

I can't say as a matter of fact that Mary was a virgin at the time of Jesus' conception. I can say as a matter of faithful understanding that this pregnancy being a combination of the natural and the divine suggests something important about how the fruit of this pregnancy will function in the world. Jesus will live and move and have his being within the boundaries and bonds of this world—bound by time and space and place, bound by mortality and specificity. He will live and move and have his being among the people and cultures of this world, a first century Jew in a land governed by the Temple cult and occupied by imperial Rome. All this, while moreover functioning from above and beyond. He will serve within history, and utterly change history, though he won't have come bearing of history its long scars and tragic inheritance.

I can't say as a matter of fact that Mary was a virgin at the time of Jesus' conception, but neither do I need to. What I can say is that the problems which history and the painful fact of a zero-sum reality continue to hand down to us can only truly be redeemed by something from utterly beyond now breaking in, and moreover breaking in to introduce into the machinations of history something utterly other than how we go about the normal course of things. Love. That

positive-sum thing, the Vulnerable, embodied, self-giving love, indeed *kenosis*, the self-emptying of God for the sake of the world to abound in grace and joy.

The degree to which we have been born into sin is the degree to which Jesus comes with a power to transcend and redeem. The degree to which I have been born, for example, as an inheritor of white supremacy is the degree to which Jesus comes from beyond to disrupt that terrible inheritance which I myself can only hardly do. The degree to which you, for example, dwell on land wrested from indigenous people is the degree to which Jesus arrives as one to reset and restore, which everyone everywhere needs to have done but no one anywhere can absolutely do. The degree to which we all live amidst nature which is, as it turns out, exhaustible is the degree to which God will arrive among us to sustain us and press upon us an imperative to sustain one another, now and for generations to come.

When we declare that Jesus was without sin, it's not to say he never hurt someone's feelings or said a bad word or became short-tempered or bad-mannered, and it's certainly not to say he wasn't the fruit of human sexual reproduction, which casts sex as the original sin, which it's not. It is to say that the long and deep entanglements of sin are things he somehow transcended and redeemed, came amidst yet didn't come of.

So, no, the virgin birth shouldn't proclaim to us some imperative about how women in particular should be, but should impress upon us a disruption that will amount to good news for the poor, justice for the dispossessed, and reckoning for the fruits of sin, sin which is too heavy for us to carry, too real to hide, and too deep for us to undo.

In this year of following Luke's gospel, wherein the great reversal is ever the promise, the great reversal that God brings about and of which Mary sang today—"He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty"—it's worth considering how Brethren theologian Ron Sider understood the effect of this. "God longs for the salvation of the rich as much as the salvation of the poor. Salvation for the rich will include liberation from their injustice." Liberation from *our* injustice.

Sounds good to me.

But how this can be done when injustice just seems to tighten its long and lengthening grip on us is the question that keeps me up at night, that keeps me trying to see past the rooves of the world, these many rooves of many power structures that claim themselves as the highest we can

hope for, trying to see past them as if for that wandering star, which even now searches for a place among the heavens to settle so to cast its light down on some unlikely stable.

I like to imagine that stable as having a hole in its roof.

This familiar story, this rough though lovely scene: it *means* something.

Yet so much of our Christmas imagining tends toward the sentimental more than the urgent, toward the nostalgic more than the emergent. I've even been to more than few church services around this time of year that hark us back to some bygone time that never was. And I'll admit it, I have a heart for these things. I love Dickensian London for getting in the Christmas mood—those lovely starving poor who teach mean old Scrooge the true meaning of Christmas. I love Main Street Stockbridge for feeling its happy coming. I'll reread Truman Capote's *A Christmas Memory* and watch *Charlie Brown* as if its late mid-century America again and Linus saves the day with a little recitation of the Gospel of Luke—but just a little. So, I get it. I get it if we want Christmas to be about how its gauzily remembered from our barely remembered early experiences of it rather than its rude and terrible origin and its urgent, imperative aim.

Actually, the worst response I ever got about a sermon was a Christmas sermon. One person walked quietly out of the sanctuary as soon as I'd finished speaking. Another stayed after to tell me it was the worst Christmas sermon he'd ever heard and he was happy at least it was said amidst such a small congregation.

Strange, though, because someone else was in touch to say he was visiting that Sunday, and his home church in Philadelphia was amidst a pastoral search, and did I want to apply? The search committee, to whom he'd already spoken, was interested in hearing from me.

Christmas comes attendant with all sorts of expectations.

Sometimes you don't get what you want.

Sometimes you didn't even know what you wanted until you don't get it.

It's looking as if this year we won't get what we want. If what we want is a sanctuary warm, and bright with candlelight, and cramped with people from near and far, appearing so many again from long ago, and ringing with singing from everyone—"O, Come All Ye Faithful," "Silent Night, Holy Night"—then we won't be getting what we want, which makes me sad beyond measure. I thought it'd be okay with me, and hoped it'd be okay with you, but the closer the date comes the more I realize I will miss this sorely.

(Omicron doesn't actually look like the milder version of COVID it originally seemed it'd be. It's more contagious, though, so we need to be even more careful, even more measured in our moment-to-moment risk-benefit analysis.)

All this said, Christmas is coming, nonetheless. There's no stopping a pregnancy this far along; this is the pressing, dreadful, undeniable reality of pregnancy, which is unlike most other things in our otherwise abstracted, ideological, simulated reality. The living of our days can be so oddly inconsequential. Not so with pregnancy. Not so with pregnancy when was it in utero is salvation, sustaining peace.

No, it won't look like Christmases of the recent past.

It might look, or at least feel, more like the strange arrival it was long ago, at the first, which means it might rather be a Christmas of the urgent present.

We have much to learn about self-giving love. We have much to learn about mutual care most especially for the most vulnerable, and self-restraint, self-emptying, for the sake of others' thriving. We have much to learn from this God whose love is for all the world, and for all time—past and future and the deep, bright now—and who sent his Son that we might know what love is, what it looks like lived out, and what such a living out of it can cost.

We have much to learn, and more to trust that where our learning and living reach their limits, there is grace, God's sustaining spirit.

Come back to church today at 5 PM to hear the old lessons and some new carols. Come to the stable on Christmas Eve to hear the old lessons and to sing in the cold open the old carols, the ones you love. Let the ancient word find you in new form where you can safely receive it, caught up in the contagion of good news and no other. Be safe from COVID and risk yourself in God's grace where the word will infect, transmit, take over.

Merry Christmas, all. Though we might miss it together, it is coming, so merry Christmas.

Thanks be to God.