

Advent 4, 12.19.2021

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:46b-55; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45

“He fills the hungry”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas. Wreaths are on the doors, the Christmas trees are decorated, the Nativity crèche is out, and poinsettias now decorate the sanctuary. Slowly during the season of Advent, the season of watching and preparing, we have been getting ready for Christmas. Everywhere, in our homes, our towns and cities, and in our church, it’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas.

Yet Christmas would mean very little if it were not for the story of Mary. At the center of today’s readings are Elizabeth’s words about Mary and Mary’s response to Elizabeth, her song of praise known as “The Magnificat.”

Today on the final Sunday of Advent we realize, through the story of Mary, that it is indeed beginning to look a lot like Christmas. Today offers us the opportunity to think about what we are preparing for. The words of Elizabeth to Mary say it best, “*Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb,*” Jesus.

As we have often heard before, “Jesus is the reason for the season.” We need to tell ourselves this over and over because the world around us, in juggernaut fashion, seems bent on making Christmas into a holiday about acquiring more, eating more, going to “fun” holiday destinations and generally doing everything except giving thanks for the gift of Jesus. The world tells us to travel everywhere except to Bethlehem so that Jesus might be born anew in the manger of our hearts.

The prophet Micah speaks of the promised Savior writing, “*And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord...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.*” Micah’s Savior is the Good Shepherd who feeds the hungry, so they will live in security and peace to the ends of the earth.

Christmas without the presence of Jesus means life without the presence of Jesus, the Savior of the world, the Prince of Peace. So every year we turn our attention to Mary and her song of praise. Mary must have been familiar with Hannah’s words of praise in first book of the prophet Samuel. Mary’s song of praise echoes Hannah and all the prophets. In the words of Hannah, “*The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he also exalts*” (1 Sam. 2:7). Mary’s words echo Hannah and the prophets who proclaimed a God of justice and mercy, a Good Shepherd who gathers the weak while scattering the proud.

The word “magnificat” or “magnify” is the first word of Mary’s song of praise in the Latin Bible. Mary’s song begs the question, “What or who do we seek to magnify in our own lives?” Do we live our lives seeking to use our God-given talents and abilities to magnify God, or do we seek to magnify only ourselves? Mary says, “*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*” Could Mary’s words also be your words?

Mary continues, saying, “*for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*” Mary did not give the all too familiar human response of saying, “Yup, God chose me, God chose me because I’m special. I’m the only one who can do this. God chose me because I can get this done.” Quite the opposite, Mary takes no credit and speaks of herself with great humility, saying that God has looked with favor upon her, a lowly servant. Could Mary’s words also be your words?

If it’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas, the first thing we notice is that the source of Mary’s joy is the gift of God’s grace. Mary takes no credit for her place in the salvation story, always pointing away from herself to God. Elizabeth, too, also points past herself to Mary, and past Mary, to the fruit of her womb, Jesus. Mary’s power is God’s grace in Jesus.

So as we finalize our plans and preparations for Christmas, we realize that our Christmas song of praise must include the good news of a Savior. Mary’s song of praise is the original and the first Christmas hymn. Mary continues, saying, “*for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*” How many of us have either written or received a Christmas card with the well-meant words, “I hope your Christmas this year is the greatest ever!” Mary’s words about God as the source of “great things,” remind us that only Jesus puts greatness into Christmas.

What are the great things that the Lord does in Christ Jesus? Again Mary says, “*he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 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.*” These are some of the most powerful words spoken in scripture about the God of justice and mercy.

There is a slender little book titled, *Martin Luther’s Christmas Book*, that you may be familiar with. It has had different covers over the years, and is a collection of Luther’s sermons on the Nativity. In a sermon about Mary’s song of praise, about the God who feeds the hungry, Luther wrote, “You have got to feel the pinch of hunger in the midst of scarcity and experience what hunger and scarcity are, [You have got to feel] when you do not know where to turn, to yourself, or to anyone else but only to God, that the work of God may be God’s alone and of none other...For this reason, we are Christians and have the Gospel, that we may fall into distress and lowliness and that God may have his work in us.”

In Jesus, God lifts humanity from the lowliness of sin and fills the hungry with good things. The Christian, even if he or she is rich in things, must know and feel their poverty of spirit and their need of Christ's grace and forgiveness. The Christian, even if she or he has enough to eat, must know that others do not and that God calls them to lift up the lowly and to feed the hungry.

This is what God does: God dethrones the powerful and lifts up the lowly, the weak, the oppressed, and the forgotten. God fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty. These are great words of caution to a wealthy world and its Christmas without Jesus. Perhaps nowhere else in scripture do we hear the Christian gospel spoken with such absolute anticipation of God's grace. Mary anticipates Jesus, who will always call sinful humanity into service for "the least of these."

Listen again to a sermon by Luther about Christ's birth, "There are many of you in this congregation who think to yourselves: 'If only I had been there! How quickly I would have been to help the Baby! How happy I would have been to wash his linens...and to go with the shepherds to the manger!... Yes, you would! You say that now because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at that time you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. Childish and silly thoughts are these! Why do you not do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor. You ought to serve him, for what you do to your neighbor in need, you do to the Lord Christ Himself."

Mary takes no credit or honor for herself, always pointing to Jesus who is the fulfillment of God's justice, mercy and love. Each day is an opportunity to serve Jesus; each day is an opportunity to serve one's neighbor. It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas.

If Mary's song makes us feel a bit uncomfortable, that's good. It means we are getting ready for Christmas. It has been said, "the gospel is comfort to the afflicted and an affliction to the comfortable." Mary's words remind us that Jesus is born to call sinful humanity. Jesus is born to scatter the proud, to bring down the powerful, and to lift up the lowly. Jesus is born to fill the hungry with good things, sending the rich away empty. Jesus is born for you and for me.

Mary's words are revolutionary. Mary's words declare that a Savior, Christ Jesus, cares about this world and its people. Jesus comes to fill the hungry with good things. Jesus comes; watch for him. Mary points us to the grace and the love of God in Jesus.

Could Mary's words also be your words? If so, then it's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. Jesus comes; watch for him. Jesus comes not to judge, but to save you and me. Jesus comes to fill the hungry; Jesus comes to fill you and me with grace so that we might share God's grace with our neighbor. It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. Amen.