

“Hope and Humility Reveal the Light”

Yes, we are almost there, and the ‘amazing light’ given to a young Jewish maiden is the theme of this fourth Sunday in Advent. That light was so amazing that, even now, we look to Mary as an example of how to praise the Lord; how to say “Yes!” to his control in the most difficult of times, and how to magnify him in ways that bring peace, joy and love to the world we live in.

We know that at some point prior to this story Mary was visited by a heavenly messenger identified as the angel Gabriel. I would like to highlight two things which I think influenced the outcome of that visit. First is Mary’s Jewish ness, and second is her humility.

Part of the background for this story rests with the prophet Micah who foretold the fall of the city of Jerusalem because of the sins of God’s people. Jerusalem was central to the people’s faith but there were issues in the temple. Chief among them was the giving of blood sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins when the hearts of the people remained corrupt. Forgiveness from God would come, Micah promised, but not from temple sacrifices. Out of the humble and insignificant clans of Judah God would raise up a Holy One. A shepherd king would be born in the city of David, and it would be he who would transform God’s people and restore them from a life of sin.

“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathat, one of the little clans of Israel, from you shall come one who is from old. He shall stand, not as a mighty king, but as one who feeds his flock in the strength of the Lord. He shall be the one of peace”.

Micah’s words and others concerning a coming Messiah were the legacy that had been told Mary from birth. She and Joseph, her intended husband, were Ephrathites, or those we might call country people, living in the area surrounding the city of Bethlehem. The one chosen to be the mother of God was neither educated nor sophisticated, but she understood and she trusted what the heavenly messenger had said.

We know very little about what happened immediately following Gabriel’s proclamation. Cultural mores would indicate that young Mary was in a very dangerous situation. The two gospel writers who record the birth of Jesus do not lead us astray with details of the wedding, however. They actually wrote several hundred years after the event and their purpose was to record the amazing things God had done. The Bible is God’s story and this part of the narrative adds a vital new dimension, revealing for us God’s reconciling love for his people in an innovative and now permanent way.

Last week Pastor Dave used the term ‘prophetic imagination’. For me the term gives the future a divine touch. I think young Mary had a prophetic imagination. Despite her unexpected crisis, she believed that something special was about to happen through her. As Dave said, prophetic imagination takes us on a journey where we are able to see new possibilities. It took Mary to her devout older and wiser Cousin Elizabeth, someone also pregnant...also waiting and expecting. We read that Elizabeth felt the presence of God’s Spirit within her even before Mary entered the house. She knew things Mary had not told her. This presence of God was the confirmation Mary needed for the future and she was at peace with His plan for her.

We herald in the Prince of Peace at Christmas time, but we also hear and read about crime, corruption, poverty and war which makes us wonder, "Is any of it real?" What difference does the coming of Christ make if we enter the season bearing old wounds and unresolved guilt? Holiday get togethers, rather than bringing us anticipated peace and joy, can be prime times for the 'bombs' lurking in family closets to explode. A 'bomb' certainly exploded in Mary's life when Gabriel told all, but the light of God's love overpowered potential evil. All those involved in the coming of Christ into the world, heard, recognized, accepted and pursued that light. Today God's love shows us how to diffuse the bombs in our lives and replace them with joy as well. Colossians 3 tells us, "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, (that's us), and clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Above all, clothe yourselves in love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

Did you hear that? God's love doesn't divide, it binds everything, and everyone, together. God did his part in fulfilling his promise to bring order out of chaos and Mary did her part when her faith and humility turned a human crisis to heavenly joy. We ask, "Is any of it real?" If you are waiting expectantly this Christmas...waiting for the long night to end, for the pain to subside, for broken relationships to be restored...pray for the Spirit of God to come into your presence with the same amazing light that came to Mary. There is a wise old Quaker saying which goes, "I may not know what I'll say or do in any given situation, but I know which way I'll lean." Mary leaned on God in her time of trouble and gave herself to his will. You and I are part of God's Christmas story present and future. Like Mary, we can respond, "Let it be!", and watch in awe as his grace-filled forgiveness defuses bombs and his peace-filled love infuses human beings.

He's almost here! May God's will be done as we gather in person, by phone or perhaps skype with loved ones this week. His healing presence and peace have been proclaimed. Let it be, dear friends. Let it be!