

4th Sunday of Advent

Sermon 12.23.18

Scripture:

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 Spirit⁴² 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."⁴⁷ 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."

The thing about a baby is that it's undeniably real.

It's unnerving how few things are these days.

It's why I'm weaning myself on Facebook. I hope this time it takes. The thought that on-line connections are being sold as equivalent to friendship is an increasingly troubling one to me. On-line connections can serve good purpose. But to the degree that spending time on social media forecloses on that same amount of time being spent in the physical presence of other people, it's deceptive and destructive. I'd venture the bet that as many relationships are in peril today because of social media as are nurtured and enriched. And this is just the interpersonal stuff. This isn't even to consider the geopolitical effects.

It's also why I'm so offended by the Trump presidency—that he operates as if reality has no bearing on him, rather that he can create reality by the power of his own marketing spiel. And then we're all required to live in that reality. There's almost nothing I can tolerate less than being

conscripted into someone else's unconscious, into someone else's delusions. So I keep hoping reality will finally catch up with him.

I'm not alone in this. Google that phrase and you'll find a news report or article from practically every month of his presidency: the promise that reality is finally catching up with him, the foretelling that reality is about to catch up with him. It's like a recurrent, if fleeting, dream that alone offers relief—but just for a moment because then he's off again, claiming General Mattis is retiring when the truth is that he *resigned*, or some such thing. "It's not true! It's not true!" I insist. "It doesn't matter," comes another, flatter voice.

When it comes to reality, though, it's wrong to think of it only in terms of just desserts. Yes, reality is consequential, but to think of it as merely the consequences of your actions is to degrade it, to cast it as something that is best avoided, come to think of it.

The truth, though, is that there's nothing as astonishingly wonderful as the real.

The other day there was a series of weather advisories—three simultaneous weather advisories. The NOAA weather website was lit up in yellows and oranges. Heavy rain. Thunderstorms. Some other thing.

When Tobias asked the forecast so he could dress right for school, I warned him of all the advisories. "Heavy rain. Rain is when water falls out of the sky. It just falls indiscriminately, everywhere. And as it falls, some of that water, if you're so ill advised as to be outside, will land on you, and you could get wet. And so could your clothes. Even your clothes might get wet.

"And this water, which is still falling, mind you: if it's falling faster than the ground can absorb it, it will puddle up. Or if it falls on ground that is uneven, it will also puddle up. And if you step in one of those puddles, your feet could get wet. So be advised!

"Also, there could be thunder. And that can be very noisy! Be advised because it can be as noisy as a train but you won't see anything that seems like it could make such a lot of noise. So be advised."

"Okay, Mom, I got it," Tobias said, well enough advised it would seem.

Of all the real things I've ever been a part of, though—rainstorms and hiking mountains and singing in choirs, being a little sister and a big rower and a pastor in this tiny church where I just keep staying and staying and where the relationships are few in number and therefore all the more immediate, it all becoming evermore real with each passing year—there's been nothing as real

as pregnancy and birth, my easily unfolding pregnancy with Tobias and his ambivalent birth, my easily unfolding pregnancy with Jack and his then hurry to get out and join the world. “Let’s get the party started,” it was as if he was saying as he made his slippery way.

Talk about real.

This encounter between old Elizabeth, now pregnant with John, and her young kinswoman, Mary, now pregnant with Jesus: it’s so very real. It’s almost embarrassing—that it’s there in scripture, that we’re to talk of it in worship, bodies doing what no willpower could make them do but which they do because that’s what they’re made to do, *women’s* bodies, burgeoning, bulbous and weighty, bone and brain and fluid and *pain*. Whether or not it ever happened, this encounter between old Elizabeth and young Mary; or, if it happened, whether it happened in just this way: this encounter between two women involved in two unlikely pregnancies and readying themselves for two births that, like every birth, could go any which way, and either to happy or to grave consequence, or to both happy *and* grave consequence: this is so strangely, astonishingly, real.

I mean, it makes sense that a girl as young as Mary, in the midst of her first pregnancy and by such unlikely means, would seek out an elder, someone who, though also amidst her first (also surprising) pregnancy, would have known more about what to expect in all this. It makes sense that Mary would seek out Elizabeth, would be the one to make that journey to her, younger as Mary was, and earlier in her term.

But more than the good sense that this encounter might actually make, the whole point of Luke’s telling of the gospel narrative, from the conception of Jesus to the crucifixion of Jesus to the resurrection of Jesus and the activation of the church: his whole aim seems to be to bring home the utter realness of it all.

And not because of some latent worry that it would be a story cast aside as “just a story.” No, I don’t think Luke was writing from such a defensive crouch—as if, since writing a “religious” story, he’d assume a need to defend it; as if he could anticipate the scientific materialism that would, a millennium and a half hence, insist upon defining reality in weirdly narrow terms (only that which can be proven, only that which can be replicated. But then what of the imagination, what of ideas, what of history, what of love? Are none of these real?) No, no, no: Luke’s insistence upon the reality of the story he had to tell wasn’t to defend against future skepticism and

scientism. His insistence on its reality was rather to challenge the ever-present human desire to escape.

To escape! Because the story Luke had to tell wouldn't be a means to escape the real, as so many mythologies have always been, either themselves a way of escaping into a fantasy land or as an expression of some hope that there might be escape, *deus ex machine* coming in to save the day. ("It's a bird! It's a plane!" "Stop the world! I want to get off!" "My hero.") No, *this* story that Luke had to tell, of a baby and a young mother and a kind father and a rude birth and a brutal ruler and (yes) a dream-inspired escape; and then of a young man who'd stop at nothing to impress upon the world the power of love, the imperative to love, the assurance that amidst the sharp and painful realities of reality the only means of salvation *is love*: this story wouldn't be a means to escape the real, it would be a means to access the real.

Worse, it would be a demand of the real.

Worse because who *doesn't* want to escape? Who couldn't use some relief from reality's pressing upon us its urgency, its significance, even its disappointing tedium? Who doesn't want a night at the movies or a week at a spa or a month in Vegas or just a daily dose of something to take the edge off, or perhaps to sharpen an edge that has gone sort of dull? (Weren't you edgy once? I had a motorcycle and steel-toed boots.) Because I know, I know: reality can be tough. I know even within this small congregation, even limited to the last couple of weeks, as wondrous as it can all be, as astonishing as it all is, it's also rough, a rending of the heart.

But that too—that too is its loveliness.

The birth of Christ, yet to come, already come, invites us into such astonishment at life's loveliness, presses upon us the distressing awareness that it could all go suddenly wrong, pushes us to the edge of all we can muster: the awe, the hope, the fear, the wonder.

Woe unto those who would never know such utter reality.

Pity those with whom reality never catches up.

Rejoice that, as imposing, even exhausting, as such immediacy can be, we aren't ever to handle it all alone, are instead to gather in witness, recognition, the shared work of caring. Christ calls us each and all, the mewling cry of a newborn that makes all else secondary to the demand of love and succor.

It's a lovely sound.

It's a terrifying sound—because you think you'll never have another moment's rest, another moment's peace.

It pulls you from sleep, and you hate to hear it, and you're relieved to hear it because it means all is well with this but seedling whose power of insistence will mean its continued thriving. Yet it means also there's some trouble that is yours to address.

We are the children of God.

We are the mother of God.

O come, then, all ye faithful. Come! Let us adore him.

Thanks be to God.