

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, Co-Pastor

December 20, 2009
Fourth Sunday of Advent
Luke 1:39-45

Moving with Mary's Song

As some of you know I am a member of the Bozeman Symphonic Choir where I have been singing tenor for the last several seasons. Last weekend was our annual holiday concert. Many of you were there on either Saturday evening or Sunday afternoon. Although it is a tradition to have a holiday concert each December, the choir's portion of the concert this year was particularly focused on some of the lighter and more popular secular Christmas songs with favorites like "Twas the Night Before Christmas," "Here Comes Santa Claus," and a couple of medleys that included "Frosty the Snowman," "Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer," and "The Holy and the Ivy," to name just a few. I should add that the concert included a few of the popular Christian Christmas carols as well bringing into a balance of sorts between the secular and sacred aspects of the Christmas season. The concert repertoire acknowledged the dual nature of Christmas in our culture. And then to add to the mix, the concert made a nod to the Jewish Hanukkah celebration with a couple of pieces sung in Hebrew around that seasonal theme. While I would imagine that there were some who thought it was too light, or too secular, or too sacred, or too politically correct, I suspect that the vast majority of concertgoers enjoyed the eclectic balance and variety and went home from the performance buoyed up in this season.

In our culture we have for generations found that this time leading up to December 25th to be a time when Christmas is understood in a number of contrasting ways. In addition to the classic sacred/secular contrast, there are also the contrasts of childlike fun with Santa, elves reindeer and snow with the more serious reflections of giving to and providing help to those in need. It is often expressed that the Christian Christmas is the true and serious meaning of this season, while the secular Christmas is the fun and even frivolous understanding. While I would be first in line to declare that the true and profound meaning of Christmas has at its core the marking of the birth of Jesus 2000 years ago—the incarnation of God, I would like to think through for a bit this morning whether our Christian Christmas is rightly understood narrowly as serious, in contrast to the more fun side of this season.

On this last Sunday of Advent, the Sunday before Christmas, we find in our Bible reading the story of Mary, who is pregnant with Jesus, traveling to visit a "relative" of hers, Elizabeth, who is also pregnant. These details in themselves provide some ironic twists in this amazing Christmas story. Nothing is typical about either of these pregnant women. First of all, Elizabeth is an elderly woman who has never borne children and who is now beyond childbearing age. She and her husband Zechariah have experienced a miraculous pregnancy that was prophesied to Zechariah through the visitation of an angel. Elizabeth's pregnancy was not unlike that of the miraculous pregnancy late in life that the Old Testament Abraham and Sarah experienced. It was a miraculous pregnancy that signaled that there was about to be a change—a big change—in the workings of God among the people. So we have Elizabeth, an elderly pregnant woman as one of the main characters in this story.

The other pregnant woman is Mary. With all of the artwork over the centuries portraying Mary as the supremely serene and mature mother of Jesus we can easily forget

some of the important basic details of who she was at the time of her pregnancy. There are two particular facts that together conspire against her. First she is a teenager—a young girl who has only come into child-bearing age of late. And secondly and more shocking, Mary is an unwed expectant mother. Although Joseph is a key person in this story, he is neither the father of the baby Mary is carrying, nor is he yet married to Mary. Mary, a virgin, has also been visited by an angel, Gabriel, who explains to her that she has been chosen to bear none other than the son of God. So the other main character in today's narrative is a young small town, unknown teenage girl who is unmarried and pregnant.

These two women are not like the pregnant women today who you would find in a childbirth class who are similar in age and in circumstance. No these are two women of two different generations who have sought out each other for support and encouragement in the midst of their individual surprising circumstances. What these two women do have in common is that they are both in their own ways from the margins of the society. In fact when we read a bit further in the story we learn that Mary stayed with Elizabeth and Zechariah for 3 months before returning to her home. Clearly Mary found refuge and sanctuary in their home during her pregnancy. For indeed she needed the retreat in order to better understand and accept what was happening to her.

The interaction of these two women and how they support one another and affirm one another is deeply touching—especially for those of us on this side of history. For we know that it was God working through these two unlikely women that the world was about to be changed. The irony here that borders on the humorous is that the Almighty God of the cosmos is about to turn the world upside-down in the most unlikely and unimaginable way—through the birth of helpless, vulnerable and insignificant babies. First, John, born to Elizabeth, who would grow to become the forerunner, the herald, the advance man whose role it would be to shake awake the world so that there would be at least some who would be ready to see God in the man Jesus. And then Jesus, born to Mary, who would bring about a whole new understanding of God's love for the entire world.

What is about to come from these two, Elizabeth and Mary, is a radical reorientation for the world that as new and needed as it was 2000 years ago, is still a reorientation for which the world in which we live today longs.

One not need look too far at all to see that our world today is far from perfect. Corruption, selfishness and injustice abound, leading to distrust between nations, leading to a huge portion of the world's people who have less than what they need for basic health and welfare, leading to warfare and strife, leading to despair and a lack of hope.

What is remarkable about these events leading up to the birth of Jesus is just how clueless the world was to God's coming. While Mary and Elizabeth along with Joseph and Zechariah were aware of something special brewing, virtually no one else in the world at that time knew of God's impending intervention. While the Jews of that time were certainly aware of and even clung to the numerous prophecies pointing toward the Messiah who was promised by God, there was nothing particularly special about the time in which Mary and Elizabeth lived that would have made the Jews any more expectant than they had been over the generations prior. God chose plain old unremarkable people in which to begin the new narrative of history that was later understood to be the New Testament period.

The time in which we live today as the people of God in the 21st century is surprisingly similar to the time in which Mary and Elizabeth lived. In this new millennium the Christian church has been marginalized to the point that those without solid foundations in the Christian tradition are left to seek meaning and purpose and identity through the powerful forces of commercial consumerism which makes all kinds of promises of fulfillment and relief in the midst of the chaos in which we live. Meaning and purpose come in obtaining the right object at the right time to meet what are to be perceived as expectations of us by others. At no time of year is this more evident to us than in this pre-Christmas shopping season. The countdown to Christmas turns Christmas itself into some sort of target or destination toward which we are speeding at an ever-increasing velocity.

But like Mary and Elizabeth, each of whom had a secret knowledge that was confirmed literally within each of their bodies of a fundamental change that was about to occur, we who look back to that first Christmas have some special, what even some might call a secret knowledge and insight into what that coming of Christ means for our future.

That's why our observance of Advent each year gives us the opportunity to ponder the mystery of God's love for us and for the world. It infuses us with a hopefulness in the midst of a world that can really get us down if we're not careful. What a relief it is, what a gift it is, to look to Christmas as the beginning, not the end. For we know that the baby born to that unwed teenage mother would ultimately make clear and certain that the God who made us and the world is the same God who took on human flesh when he sent his Son Jesus to declare the pure and simple and hugely profound love of God for all.

Recently someone asked me what the definition of a carol is (as in Christmas carol). Not knowing a specific definition I went in search of its meaning. I found that a carol is a song of joy that points to the gift of Jesus at Christmas. While it is possible to have carol apply to the themes of Advent and Easter, Advent carols and Easter carols are no where close to the use of carols in sharing the gift of Jesus. So while our Christmas carols are serious in their message, they are also joyful in their essence. Of course, the coming of Jesus is good news to share. Of course that serious gift of God is to be celebrated with joyful thanksgiving as well as with thankful joy.

As Mary accepts God's call to do her important and essential part in God's gift, each year in Advent we strive and seek to discern our part in the world today.