

December 23, 2012

**The Fourth Sunday of Advent**

Luke 1:39-55

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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My to-do list from yesterday afternoon: buy some wine, re-hang those lights that keep falling down outside, eat some chocolate, call four different stores trying to track down the baby doll that I somehow convinced myself was the perfect gift for my youngest, give up after being put on hold for what felt like hours on end, throw the rest of the to-do list out the window, eat some chocolate for fortitude, pack both girls into the car, drag them to store after store after store, stalk people to their cars for their space, harass the sales clerks for that perfect doll only to find an empty spot on the shelf, pile all of us back in the car, and on we go.

Why did I put myself and my children through all of this? A) because I am crazy. B) because I am all about Santa. But the drive was even stronger than that. It was because I am ready to feel some of the mystery and goodness of Christmas. I am tired of journeying through the darkness of Advent. I am ready for that light of God incarnate to shine in the darkness, but we can't jump ahead, there is still good work to be done.

In our collect for the day we prayed together that when Jesus comes again he may find in us a mansion prepared for himself. Today is the gut-check day. Have we done the work to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ? The gifts are bought, the cookies delivered, but are we ready – have we cleared-out the spiritual clutter and prepared a place within ourselves for God?

That is a high calling. It is tough to live-up to. We are all in this together: room must be made for God to reside in each of us. But to do this requires maturity- Spiritual maturity to set aside all the distractions that draw us continually deeper into the desires of this world, and remain centered on God and God's love for us.

And in this season of holiday parties and insane searches for baby dolls - there are many distractions and many of us find ourselves on this fourth Sunday of Advent still in an immature mind, not truly ready to create a mansion within ourselves for God.

We may not be ready for that type of maturity, but you know what? Neither was Mary. How could this young teenager be anywhere near ready to be a mother? It is absurd to think that Mary knew the type of responsibility that would come with bearing God's child when she said yes to that angel. What could have possibly prepared her for the pain and angst of parenthood: as she first bears this child and later sends him out to find his way in this broken world. Mary was not ready. But she responded to God's call with grace and lived into her role as the

Godbearer. And her mature response to God brings to the whole world the gift of God incarnate.

But Mary is more than a mere home for God's child. Her spiritual insight grows stronger as she sings the Magnificat: my soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord. Remember that God is good. She sings of our hope and God's promise to the world of salvation – that the mighty will be overthrown and the lowly will be lifted up. God is doing great things. If you follow her proclamation closely you will notice that she speaks of these things as if they have already happened. He has cast down the mighty from their thrown and has lifted up the lowly. It is already done. Even though we might not see it, might not yet feel the ramifications of it, God has already acted. And so Mary shows us how to live in this in-between time - between Christ's birth and Christ's return: we live as if in the fullness of time, God's kingdom here on earth has already come into being. Mary's song points to God's kingdom to that heavenly realm. Like Mary, even though it may push our spiritual maturity to the edge, we strive to live into that which we proclaim – namely that God is doing great things –is making all things new - and that we are redeemed and restored through God's love for us, through this child that is about to come into our world once again. And even as we proclaim the promise of God's kingdom, even before the breath has left our body to give voice to our words, that kingdom is moving ever closer to becoming a full reality. It is already happening, but has not been fully realized, not yet come to completion. Our proclamation of God's kingdom of God's love moves us all together closer to that kingdom.

I know this is becoming a little philosophical, but stay with me. And so even as we live in our reality now, through our proclamation in our word and action of God's fidelity, we are also living into the promise of what is and what is to come. It is similar to raising our kids- we make them eat vegetables, we read books with them, we take them to museums, we teach them languages, we bring them to church, we snuggle in bed – we do all these things because it is good for who they are now, but we do this also looking toward who these children will become. The same is true for our world - through our faith and how we express it in our lives we are participating in the redemption and healing of our lives and our world right now and moving us all to the fullness of time and the realization of God's kingdom. So, tempting as it is, we can't remain in our immature state. We must continue that spiritual work to prepare in us a space for God.

So we do not have the freedom to let our hearts grow hard from the pain we experience in our own lives and from the suffering that we see out in the world. There are all sorts of reminders as we reach out to our friends and family that the joy of this season can be elusive. People continue to struggle - from broken relationships, economic hardship, illness and isolation. The strife of life does not ease up for the holidays. And in the face of all of this it is hard to hold on to the promise of God's love for us, it is hard to grasp the joy and wonder of new life and new birth in the birth of baby Jesus. But as we come together again to remember and celebrate the birth of the Christ child we are reminded that God is faithful.

God's love for us is a sustaining love – the love that was present from the very beginning when God created our world and all that is in it and declared it good. This pain and suffering that we are experiencing, they are not of God. They are not God's wish for the world. We can't allow our experience of pain, of grief, of isolation to harden our hearts.

Instead, prepare in yourselves a mansion for God. We are doing it. We are preparing a mansion for God as again and again we gather together to pray for one another - even for our enemies and those who do us harm. We say these prayers both for ourselves but also on behalf of those who are too sad or too angry or too shocked to do it for themselves. We are ever striving for that spiritual maturity, for reaching the fullness of who God has created us to be - for becoming more completely a people whose response to the challenges and the brokenness of our world are compassion and love. And we come together at this table and give thanks, as we remember how time and again even in the midst of terrible darkness, terrible suffering, even in the midst of complete brokenness, God reaches out to heal, to redeem, and to love us. Each time we gather around this table we hear the words and remember our story, live again the story of God's love for us and we again grasp the truth of that love and draw it into the depth of our beings.

Ready or not, the time is here to release whatever immaturities we have anchored within us and embrace this journey that moves us deeper and deeper into the peace and love of God. And as we proclaim with our words and our lives the greatness of God, the peace of God, the love of God, God's kingdom is moving more and more present and complete into our world. It is not solely dependent upon us to make God's kingdom realized; God is doing the bulk of the work, but we do have a part in it. Nurture that part of you - the part that is dedicated to God and join with Mary this morning to proclaim with your whole being the wonder of God's love for us.

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,  
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; \*  
the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.

Sing, rejoice, remember, proclaim, wonder over God's love for us - love that was, that is, and that is to come.