

December 20, 2009

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:39-55

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

The Rev'd Elizabeth Shows Caffey, associate rector

At my house right now we are busy preparing. The Christmas tree is up and decorated, the house is well on its way to being clean, all of the presents have been bought and are somewhere in the process of being wrapped. There are still a couple of packages sitting on our dining room table waiting to be shipped. The menu for Christmas dinner has been decided, but the final grocery shopping isn't done. It seems like everything has been started and is in some stage of progression, but for one reason or another is not quite completed. This describes where I am spiritually right now as well. I have spent some time in quiet prayer and preparation during this Advent season, but with all of the worldly distractions, the endless lists of things that must be done; it has been hard to prepare as I would like to for God incarnate.

Mary too is preparing. She is getting herself ready for the drastic changes that are about to happen in her life. She is preparing for the birth of her first child, this miraculous, God-given child. Before the visitation of the angel, her life had been pretty ordinary, everything had already been decided. As a young girl, she was engaged to Joseph, a carpenter. He was a good man. Her future was set, that is until God decided to break-in and interrupt things. In just a few simple words, she assented to God, but with those words she had risked everything - put her security, her whole life into jeopardy. Mary knew what it could cost her to agree to have this child, and yet without hesitating, with complete faith she agrees to be a vessel of God's grace. And now Mary has come to stay with her kin Elizabeth, as she prays, ponders, and prepares for this new life growing within her.

What courage she must have had. This was a life-long commitment she was making: to birth this child, nurture him, raise him, provide for him, love him. Instead of running in fear, Mary is able to see the unlimited possibilities in the birth of this child. She foresees the limitless possibilities for God's grace to transform the world. And in her joy she sings. She sings of God who fills the hungry, extends mercy to all generations, and lifts up the lowly. She has every reason not to sing because of what this will cost her, and still she sings of God who looks upon her and calls her blessed, God who takes human form in this child she is carrying, God who comes to turn the world upside down. All around her Mary sees that with God all things are possible.

"Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord" proclaims Elizabeth. She rejoices at Mary's faith. Mary's response to God, her complete faith, has made the incarnation possible. Her

belief has brought Jesus into the world. Mary has made it possible for God to take human form, to come into the world in the ordinary way, to live and move among us. There are no limits to what God can bring about in our world, if we will trust and believe. No limits.

Mary has complete faith, but what about us? I started this morning talking about all that we still have left to do in my household to get ready for Christmas. There is so much in our lives that serve to distract us, to pull us away from belief, away from God. Our discouragements, our failures, our busyness can pull us away from living a life of faith. The sheer weight of carrying around all the burdens of daily life: taking care of your family, making sure the bills are paid, working overtime to pay down your debt, whatever those burdens are, that weight can drag us down, disparage our souls. Perhaps even without realizing it, we find that we have turned away from God, away from the fullness of life. Mary certainly had enough reasons to turn away from God. She could have said, "No I will not put myself in jeopardy; I will not carry this child and bring him into the world." But she chose to turn toward God. Faith is a choice. It requires us to act. In faith we turn our hearts toward God, and open ourselves to God acting in our lives. We open the way for God to continue to bless the world through us.

Right here on this campus we see faith at work each Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday as people come together to clothe children with dignity. The volunteers do this because they care. They do this because they have faith that God is in there somewhere in the relationships that are formed and in the clothing that is donated and then gifted to a child. We have learned through this ministry that children do better in school, are more confident, are more fully themselves when they are appropriately clothed. We started Threads because we saw a need in the Atlanta community that was not being addressed. Through this ministry God continues to transform the lives of not only the children that are served, but all who participate in the ministry.

Not all stories of faith are as jazzy as the story of Threads ministry. Faith, belief in God may be at work quietly in our lives as well transforming our hearts and our lives. But faith is a choice, it is a choice we must make daily in our lives. Today will we turn our hearts desires towards God or will we allow ourselves to be distracted? There is still time to step away, as Mary has, and ponder over the coming of Christ. There is still time to prepare ourselves, set aside the busyness, the endless "to-dos" and the find space to prepare our hearts and minds for the wonder of God incarnate. There is still time to chose faith and turn our hearts and our lives toward God.