

The Fourth Sunday of Advent  
December 23, 2018  
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Micah 5:2-5a  
Song of Mary: *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55)  
Hebrews 10:5-10  
Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)



It's not Christmas yet. But it's close! So very close.

It's been looking like Christmas outside for quite a while now.

Even here, when we strive to maintain Advent purity, it's beginning to look like Christmas. And if that weren't enough to put us in mind of Christmas yet, the opening lines of our first reading from the Book of Micah help:

**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 ...**

I cannot help but think of the Christmas carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." It's a Christmas carol, of course, not an Advent hymn, so we're not singing it as part of either of the morning liturgies today. At least not officially.

And yet, Christmas is so close ... we might as well sing a verse – especially since it seems so apt:

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by;  
yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light;  
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.



That last line catches me: "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

The "thee," of course, is Bethlehem. That's the place where "the hopes and fears of all the years" meet. All our "hopes and fears" meet there in the birth of Jesus. That's our Christmas message.

Of course, something of the same could be said of any birth. Hopes and fears meet there, as well. Every time. A birth is an occasion filled with joy and elation, but it's a sobering occasion, all the same. And fear and concern are always companions of hope and joy.

And if that's true of anyone in the midst of any ordinary, planned pregnancy, I wonder about the two mothers in this morning's gospel ... each of them in the middle of their respective unplanned pregnancies. Elizabeth was deemed too old to have a child, but here she is, six months along, carrying John the Baptist in her womb. And Mary, for her part is still hardly more than a child herself – and a virgin at that – but here she is, carrying Jesus.

They are, both of them, high-risk pregnancies. So hopes and fears must surely have met in them. But the fears seem the most obvious.

Mary, of course, is an unwed mother. And that made her vulnerable in just about every imaginable way. Her parents could have disowned her. So, too, her betrothed. She could have been sentenced to death. And Elizabeth was “getting on in years,” as her husband Zechariah once described her. Even today, pregnancies are more difficult for older women. More can go wrong – for them and for the child. And it’s a fair guess that she and her husband were too old to be confident of living long enough to see their child grow up and become a man.

And both of them had reasons to be afraid for their unborn children. Each of their sons would suffer unspeakably violent deaths. Elizabeth may not have lived long enough to see what came of John, his head literally served on a platter. But Mary, by all accounts, certainly did live to see her son’s violent death. She lived long enough to see him scourged and nailed to a cross.

So, yes, there were plenty of reasons for them to be fearful. That’s obvious to me.

But what strikes me is that when their fears meet their hopes, the hope – and the joy – win out. The hope and the joy win out for both of them. And they win out, apparently, easily and overwhelmingly. Mary sets out and goes – “with haste,” we’re told – to make her way to her cousin Elizabeth. And maybe she was driven to seek her out because she was afraid. But it doesn’t feel like it. Indeed, though there were many reasons for adult men to be reluctant to travel these lonely roads alone, this teenage girl doesn’t hesitate to head out on her own.

And once there, she and her cousin Elizabeth are filled with joy. As one writer sums it up:

[Mary] makes her way through the hill country alone and yet unafraid. Her haste is not the haste of one running for cover; it’s the rush of someone who can’t wait to share the good news she knows.

She finds her cousin, who has good news of her own, and that moment of joy and hope and faith is so powerful, so far from anyone’s containing it, that the children in their wombs leap for joy with the women. And they are filled with the Holy Spirit, filled with the fullness of what God is doing, wonderful beyond comprehension or description.

... it would have been difficult to find two people so unlikely to be hopeful to the point of being ecstatic -- the single pregnant girl traveling alone and the elderly wife of a poor country priest considered cursed by his neighbors. <sup>i</sup>

A few of us came out a couple of weeks ago to watch *The Nativity Story*, the 2006 film featured in our monthly “Second Sunday Cinema” series. The film captured their shared joy.

The poignancy of the idea is so striking, so palpable.

And I think that's what we need. We need to see the stunning beauty of their joy in their meeting, so spontaneous, so unlikely, so profound, so immediate, so overwhelming. We need their example, their exuberance, to embolden us by their proclamation of the Gospel – especially since women so rarely are featured so prominently in that kind of a role. In both of these women, in whom “hopes and fears ... are met,” hope and joy win out.

The prospect of giving birth is still a meeting of “hopes and fears.” Even in our own day.

Maybe now more than ever, the reasons to be fearful may be the more obvious. We could come up with a list of reasons for anyone to be afraid: overpopulation; global climate change; diminishing prospects for succeeding generations; growing extremism at home and abroad ... to name just a few.

And yet women still have babies. We celebrated that bold and wonderful experience last week, when we offered prayers and prayer shawls to two of our moms expecting children in the New Year. What a wonderful moment that was for us. And still is.

Women such as Kaitlin and Andrina still have babies. They still bring new life, new hope, new joy into the world. They affirm what Christmas proclaims, that the darkness of these present times will not overcome light. Any woman who brings a child into this world is audacious, willing to let love and light and joy and hope win out (rather than give into fears)!

Mary's song, the *Magnificat*, sings of a world where all that's wrong will be overturned. Which is to say that her hope and joy are meant for us, as well. Even as we consider all that is wrong in this world, all the reasons we might feel afraid, we are reminded by her song – and by Mary's joy-filled encounter with her cousin Elizabeth – that God's intent for us is something more.

It's not Christmas yet. But it's close. And there is much Christmas cheer for us. And so, on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, I am reminded of a Christmas card I received a few years back. It included a quote our former Presiding Bishop, Katharine Jefferts-Schori, who said: “Advent is the season when Christians are called to live with more hope than the world thinks reasonable.”

The card went on to include a few lines of a poem by Madeline L'Engle describing Christmas:

This is the irrational season / Where love blooms bright and wild.  
Had Mary been filled with reason / There'd have been no room for the child.

And so, because Christmas is so very near, I'll end with a Christmas wish for you. I wish for you courage and faithfulness to hope beyond all reason: that amidst all that gives us fear in this world, joy and hope will win out; that we may seek out the light that is never overcome by darkness; that we may share light and love and joy with everyone we meet. And so may you and yours enjoy a blessed Advent and a very Merry Christmas.

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Dylan Breuer @ [https://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2006/12/fourth\\_sunday\\_o.html](https://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2006/12/fourth_sunday_o.html).