

4th Sunday of Advent
Sermon 12.22.24

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 Spirit ⁴² 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." 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." (407)

At last, it begins. This thing we've been waiting for: at long last it begins. Advent is a short season, but it spans a lot of time, and moves backwards, as I said on that first week. Beginning with the end of time on the first Sunday, it then drops us in the middle for the second and third, when Jesus was grown and just beginning his ministry, and it ends at the beginning, just before his birth. And at last, we're here. "In those days Mary set out and went with great haste..."

It hardly needs explaining, this thing that's finally happening. Hardly, because this story has been with us since *our* beginning, each of ours I bet. Even those who didn't grow up celebrating Christmas as a religious holiday I'll bet know who Mary is, know what is just now happening with her. I bet no one here can remember the first time you ever saw a creche scene, the first time you ever heard of that mysterious star or the angel Gabriel who had just now visited Mary, had just announced to her that she would bear a son.

He would be conceived by the Holy Spirit and would therefore be called son of the Most High. He would be great and of his kingdom there would be no end.

For all this, Mary would go with haste to her kinswoman's house, Elizabeth who was also pregnant, which was also unlikely since Elizabeth was old. Six months further along, Elizabeth's pregnancy was with John, and though for both women this was a first, Elizabeth at least had the wisdom of years to bring to this whole wild disruption, a most unlikely pregnancy, a most unlikely new thing being born into the world.

Young Mary would go to her and stay with her for three months, until the time would come for Elizabeth to give birth. Ever the herald, ever the one to go before, John even in utero would prepare a way for Jesus, John's mother helping Jesus' mother prepare for something that can only hardly be imagined—utter disruption.

That's an essential implication of the so-called virgin birth, by the way—a total disruption, and not just of Mary's life but of all life, all history, a total *interruption*. The immaculate conception, the virgin birth: these aren't things that mean what you think they mean. The purported fact that Mary's pregnancy was conceived by the Holy Spirit and not by typical human sexual intercourse: this isn't to suggest that sex is bad. The takeaway point of Mary's storied virginity isn't that women should from now on aim to be, like Mary, somehow fruitful while also remaining "pure," whatever that means. The takeaway point is that the Messiah would necessarily be born into the world but also transcendent of the world, born into history but not entangled in its many snares—an interruption of the inheritance of so much tragedy, so much intergenerational injustice.

Hannah Arendt would classify this as an extreme version of natality. Arendt points out in the most obvious fact what is also most astonishingly powerful about the human being: that we are born into this world, and by virtue of this we're capable of taking action and bringing about the unexpected.

Prognosticators always think they know. We always think we know. We say, "If trends continue, then this thing will happen or that thing will happen." But trends almost never continue. At some point, there's some unexpected zig where trends suggested things would continue to zag. But, no, because see, something new is always being born into the world. It's always happening, every day, every moment of every day.

Human natality is the source of worldly hope, and in what's about to happen in our enacting remembrance whereby what we remember happens again, there's even meta-worldly hope, super-natural hope. A miracle!

The birth of God!

I can't say as a matter of fact that Mary was a virgin at the time of Jesus' conception. But I can say as a matter of faithful understanding that this pregnancy being a combination of the natural and the divine suggests something important about how the fruit of this pregnancy will function in the world. Jesus will live and move and have his being within the boundaries and bonds of this world—bound by time and space and place, bound by mortality and specificity. He will live and move and have his being among the people and cultures of this world, a first century Jew in a land governed by the Temple cult and occupied by imperial Rome. All this, while moreover functioning from above and beyond. He will serve within history, and utterly change history, though he won't have come bearing of history its long scars and tragic inheritance.

I can't say as a matter of fact that Mary was a virgin at the time of Jesus' conception, but neither do I need to. What I can say is that the problems which history and the painful fact of a zero-sum reality continue to hand down to us can only truly be redeemed by something from utterly beyond now breaking in—and moreover breaking in to introduce into the machinations of history something utterly other than how we go about the normal course of things. Love. That positive-sum thing, the vulnerable, embodied, self-giving love, indeed *kenosis*, the self-emptying of God for the sake of the world to abound in grace and joy.

The degree to which we have been born into sin is the degree to which Jesus comes with a power to transcend and redeem. The degree to which I have been born, for example, as an inheritor of white supremacism is the degree to which Jesus comes from beyond to disrupt that terrible inheritance which I myself can only hardly do. The degree to which you, for example, dwell on land wrested from indigenous people is the degree to which Jesus arrives as one to reset and restore, which everyone everywhere needs to have done but no one anywhere can absolutely do. The degree to which we all live amidst nature which is, as it turns out, exhaustible is the degree to which God will arrive among us to sustain us and press upon us an imperative to sustain one another, now and for generations to come.

When we declare that Jesus was without sin, it's not to say he never hurt someone's feelings or said a bad word or became short-tempered or bad-mannered, and it's certainly not to say he wasn't the fruit of human sexual reproduction, which then casts sex as the original sin, which it's not. It is to say that the long and deep entanglements of sin are things he somehow transcended and redeemed, came amidst yet didn't come of.

So, no, the virgin birth shouldn't proclaim to us some imperative about how women in particular should be but should impress upon us a disruption that will amount to good news for

the poor, justice for the dispossessed, and reckoning for the fruits of sin, sin which is too heavy for us to carry, too real to hide, and too deep for us to undo.

In this year of following Luke's gospel, wherein the great reversal is ever the promise, the great reversal that God brings about and of which Mary sang today—"He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty"—it's worth considering how Brethren theologian Ron Sider understood the effect of this. "God longs for the salvation of the rich as much as the salvation of the poor. Salvation for the rich will include liberation from their injustice."

Liberation from *our* injustice.

Sounds good to me.

But how this can be done when injustice just seems to tighten its long and lengthening grip on us, when so much going on seems inevitable or at the very least way beyond our power to correct or even resist, is the question that keeps me up at night, that keeps me trying to see past the rooves of the world, these many rooves of many power structures that claim themselves as the highest we can hope for, trying to see past them as if for that wandering star, which even now searches for a place among the heavens to settle so to cast its light down on some unlikely stable.

I like to imagine that stable as having a hole in its roof.

This familiar story, this rough though lovely scene: it *means* something, it means something for the future, for what future God is working, working in all things for good. Yet so much of our Christmas imagining tends toward the sentimental more than the urgent, toward the nostalgic more than the emergent. Anyone who's heard me preaching around Christmas knows this about me: I *object* to the drenching of Christmas in nostalgia, so much of our celebrating harking us back to some bygone time that never was.

That said, I *get* it. I have a heart for these things. I love Dickensian London for getting in the Christmas mood—those lovely starving poor who teach mean old Scrooge the true meaning of Christmas. I love Main Street Stockbridge for preparing the way sentimental for the happy coming of Christmas. I'll reread Truman Capote's *A Christmas Memory* and watch the Charlie Brown Christmas special to see precociously wise children in their midcentury, midwestern suburb wander in their middlebrow ennui at last to be rescued by Linus in his recitation from the Gospel of Luke. See, I get it.

I get it if we want Christmas to be about how its gauzily remembered from our barely remembered early experiences of it rather than its rude and terrible origin and its urgent,

imperative aim. Christmas comes attendant with all sorts of expectations, if these days ironically backward-looking expectations, whether to the 1950s or the 1850s. I get it.

But sometimes you don't get what you want.

The future is coming, and it's not like the past, though it has come to us, at least in our politics, by promising to return us to some unspecific past: "Make America great again." No, rather the future is coming, is always coming.

What we shall we do with it, what we shall do about it, this season would have us pressingly know has something also to do with the coming of Christ, this baby, this *baby*! So real. So demanding! So unwilling to let us sleep and so capable of calling us into a willingness to serve, to serve in love.

The reality of the future is pressing upon us, and it is overwhelming, and its unknown to us which mystery makes it scary, but which mystery makes it also full of possibility, full of wonder. "What if we get it right?" asks the title of a book I haven't read about climate solutions. Its subtitle, *Visions of Climate Futures*. See, because maybe we'll get it right, and not just about the climate, though that would be a lot, but about all sorts of things in need of redemption and just now facing new birth.

The reality of the future presses in, and this time we might get some things right.

So let us go and see this thing which is to take place.

Thanks be to God.