

**GOD SETS THE STAGE**  
**Micah 5:1-4 / Luke 1:39-45**  
**Preached by Dr. Cahill**  
**Babcock Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday December 20, 2015**

When you hear for the first time Luke's account of Mary's visit with Elizabeth, it appears the story is about them. Read it a second time and you realize the story starts out being about Mary and Elizabeth but also about John the Baptist and his cousin Jesus. But look again and you realize this is really all about the miracle of the incarnation already impacting the world even before Christ is born.

In just a few days our Advent journey ends and the celebration of the incarnation, God becoming one of us, for us, begins. Both readings, from Micah and Luke prepare us for the final leg of our pilgrimage to Bethlehem's manger.

Micah sets the stage for Christ's birth. He describes Bethlehem as a walled in city under siege, leaving us to wonder, why was Bethlehem, a small suburb of Jerusalem, chosen to be the birthplace of the one who, "will stand and feed his flock with the power of the Lord," so God's people, "will live secure."

Micah provides a clue, "...his origins is from of old, from ancient days." (Micah 5:5) Bethlehem was the seat of David, the son of Jesse. Great David's greatest son will emerge from this walled city under siege to bring his Kingdom not of this world into the world.

Luke reports Mary learned two things from the angel Gabriel: she is to be the mother of God and her older cousin is also expecting a child. Hearing this, Mary takes the long journey to Elizabeth's home.

It seems right that Mary and not Elizabeth should take the initiative to make the trip because Mary was younger and Elizabeth was further along in her pregnancy. But, Mary could have sent word for Elizabeth to visit her. After all Mary's child would outrank her child. Even so, when Gabriel told Mary Elizabeth's sorrow had ended, Mary decided to go on the long trek to visit Elizabeth if only because it was the right thing to do.

Hidden in this story is a theme that goes to permeate Luke's gospel and it can be seen in Mary's decision to humble herself and go to Elizabeth. Remember, Mary was a very young and impressionable girl. She could have let the news that she was the mother of God go to her head, pull rank and command Elizabeth to come and pay homage to her. But she didn't. Even before his birth Christ's presence living in Mary was already impacting her attitudes and behaviors.

The presence of Christ and Mary's submission to God rapidly fell into sync with God's plan. We read the instant Mary and Elizabeth saw each other something wonderful happened. The child leaped in Elizabeth's womb. Before he was born, John the Baptist met his cousin in a wonderful, mystical way.

There's no gospel record of John and Jesus ever meeting again until Christ's baptism at the river Jordan. It's likely they met during their childhoods, after all they were cousins, but it's equally unlikely they didn't, it was a long journey from here to there. Either way, it really doesn't matter. What does matter is this: God's presence flows unhindered through human events and always finds its focus when people like Mary, humble themselves, go the extra mile and assume the role of a servant.

Isn't this really what Christmas is all about, giving the gift of yourself in response to God giving himself to us through his Son?

From his birth in a borrowed stable until his end in a borrowed tomb, Jesus always lived for others and the glory of God. That means everything Jesus said and did throughout his life, up to the time he laid down his life for his friends was to please God. So let's not forget our celebration of Christmas is the celebration of the humility of Christ and his submission to us for us, to be our servant and savior even unto death on the cross.

The third reading for this fourth Sunday in Advent comes from the Letter to the Hebrews. In this reading, addressed to Jewish Christians, the author identifies Jesus, the Son of God, as the High Priest, "the one who in every respect has been tested, as we are, yet without sin."

The author then goes on to describe the responsibilities of High Priests chosen from mortals.

"Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward since he too is subject to weakness and because of this he must offer sacrifices for his own sins as well as those of the people."

This was the job description of the High Priests in the temple of Jerusalem, to be the bridge between God and God's people by offering up sacrifices and prayers. (Hebrews 5:1-3)

The passage continues:

"In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and fears to the one who was able to save him from death and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son he learned obedience through what he suffered

and having been made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest..." (Hebrews 5:7-10)

What does this mean? Jesus the Son of God was given the role of High Priest who would offer or sacrifice himself on behalf of humanity. In Gethsemane, with loud cries and tears he pleaded to be excused from his suffering and death, but then he submitted to God and offered up himself for the sins of the world.

Never think Christ's complete submission and sacrifice of himself started at the last minute in Gethsemane. It can be seen at the very beginning of his ministry when he submitted to John's baptism. Jesus knew by accepting this baptism he would suffer and die for the same ones who crucified him. Knowing this terrifying fact, he submitted anyway, which explains why the voice from heaven said, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased."

God affirmed his Son at his baptism for setting aside his dreams and happiness, to live the life of Isaiah's Suffering Servant.

Of course Jesus sacrificed himself for us hoping we will respond in kind and Mary is one of our best role models for this life of submission and sacrifice. You remember when she was told she was chosen to be the mother of God she didn't hem and haw. She made no excuses like Moses. She didn't run away like Jonah. Instead she readily accepted her calling to be a single mother in a culture that punished unmarried mothers. She also accepted her calling to be a humble servant, to carry the Christ Child in her womb and forever in her heart.

When the baby Jesus was presented in the temple eight days after his birth, she continued to submit to God's will even after she was warned by the prophet Simeon that, "...a sword will pierce your soul," foreshadowing her grief at her son's death. So, despite all these obstacles and fearful outcomes Mary submitted to God.

"Here I am," she said, "the servant of the Lord; let it be according to your word." (Luke 1:38)

This is a story from long ago in a place far away. But this is also a story about the here and now and you and me. The author is God and we are invited to become our generation's guardians of this story by telling this story to each other. But God also invites us to enter into the story and find our places so the story continues through us. I'm not talking about being an angel or a shepherd in a Christmas pageant. I am talking about living out the gospel story in the real world in real time.

Sometimes you may find you're taking Peter's place or James' and John's as they struggle with the cost of discipleship. Other times you'll be given the role of a tax collector in need of redemption or a leper in need of healing. Once in a while you may be tempted to play a self-righteous Pharisee but think better of it and turn the part down. You might fill in for

Mary or Martha or their brother Lazarus. There are days you become the boy who gave Jesus the five loaves and two fish or the widow who put everything in the temple's coffers. Could you even see yourself as the Samaritan woman who with a healthy dose of humor verbally spared with Jesus? How about the man coming to Jesus to be delivered from his demons or the hemorrhaging woman who reached out and touched the hem of Jesus' robe?

All of them lived long ago and far away until you realize they are us and we are them. Just as Jesus loved them, Jesus loves us. When Jesus went to their homes to eat and drink, he comes to our homes to keep us company and enrich our lives. And when he called them all to follow him into the life of submission to God and service to others, at great cost, he is calling us to do the same.

Mary, Elizabeth and John, still in his mother's womb, experienced the incarnation, God becoming flesh and bone, God becoming one of us so we can become more like him.

Christmas is coming very soon. More importantly Christ is coming now, in this moment and every succeeding moment of your life. Follow Mary's example, bow down and trust your life to him. That's all he wants from you this Christmas so give him the gift of yourself.