

**Luke 1:39-55** (NRSV)

*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Marys greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. 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, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

For the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

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.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

According to the promise he made to our ancestors,

To Abraham and to his descendants forever."

**Nothing is Impossible: More JOY**

I have a friend for whom this time of year produces a great deal of anxiety. You see, he is angry about the commercialism of this season, which should be so holy. He thinks that the spiritual significance of Christmas will someday soon be forgotten. As much as I would prefer that we would only focus on the faith-centered celebrations of Christmas, I have no fear that we are forgetting about Christ each year at Christmas. In fact, the recognition of an unmerited gift of love from God in the form of a vulnerable babe, causes folks who are ordinarily indifferent to go out of their way to find religious services to attend, and ways of sharing with those in need. That is part of the miracle of Christmas!

For me, the exchange of gifts, the decorations in our Church and homes, and the adding of color to winter-drab streets is not a contradiction to what happened a long time ago. They help us recall *emotions* that otherwise might get lost in the past. The simple fact that God has come to be with us in Jesus Christ never grows stale. Visual images can help tell the story, and share the glory of Christmas!

This Advent/Christmas season is a ritual-filled time. And rituals and traditions are important. They build solidarity and generate loyalty. Whether we find meaning and inspiration in the rituals of worship, family celebrations, annual gatherings with friends, or the awesome privilege of giving to others, each act reminds us of the overwhelmingly joyous gift that God gave in Christ, and continues to give to us yet today through this faith-event. Some families have a prescribed ritual for reading the Bible on Christmas, or a ritual for how gifts are opened. Some have traditions for secretly giving a special gift to someone with a special

need, or a tradition which reminds all family members of the memory of one who now celebrates Christmas in God's heavenly home.

I cannot explain it, but every year it happens. A special quality of Divine Presence invades our world at this time of year. And year after year, the world, in some measure, stops to listen to the story of Christ's birth. And at least for a while, attitudes, motivations, responses, and virtues are enhanced in some holy way.

And I love Christmas music! For me, Christmas has to be sung. Even before Jesus was born, Mary sang of the amazing things God was doing. We heard that song in our Scripture text from Luke this morning. In this first chapter of Luke's gospel we find the moving account of Elizabeth, the mother of John, being visited by her cousin, Mary, the mother of Jesus. A spirit of JOY and celebration surrounded the births of both John and Jesus. The scene is an unnamed city in the Judean hills. Upon hearing Mary's voice, the babe in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy! Elizabeth, the elder of the cousins, is inspired by the Holy Spirit and blesses Mary for having been chosen to be the mother of the Lord and for believing and accepting the word brought to her by the angel sent from God.

Then Mary's joy and excitement are expressed in a song. She praises God for the favor bestowed upon a maiden of low estate. Her song proclaims the triumph of God's purposes for all people everywhere. All the oppressed, poor, and hungry will be blessed. Mary sings, "He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name." Now that's the song of Christmas – God has done great things, and holy is God's name. That's the essence of the Christmas gospel:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior... God's mercy is on those who fear God from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm, and has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, God has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; filled the hungry with good things, and the rich have been sent away empty."

At Christmas we celebrate the mighty acts of God. God sends the gift of a Holy Child into the world. All the conditions of normal human action and achievement are absent. They're not there. **It is totally, entirely, completely, absolutely the work of God.** The Child is a gift of God's grace. ---Of course, every birth is a gift of God's grace. Every child represents a new potential. The potential of this Holy Child is **salvation** for all who believe! So, a new spirit is released into the world with the birth of Jesus. It's a mystery beyond our understanding. God has done mighty things for us.

Another part of this season that I love are the Christmas plays and pageants! At one such Christmas pageant, a little girl dressed as an angel, was told that when cued, she should come down the aisle of the sanctuary. She innocently asked, "Do you want me to walk or fly?" It felt as though she could have flown! For the mighty works of God help us to reach beyond our human capabilities!

Peter Marshall summed it up so well when he said, "When Christmas *doesn't* make your heart swell up until it nearly bursts and fill your eyes with tears and make you all soft and warm inside, then you will know that something inside of you has died.

The mystery of Christmas gives a young virgin a song of JOY to sing. God worked miraculously in and through one who was willing to hear and follow. So now, on this Third Sunday of Advent, we pray:

"O holy Child of Bethlehem, descent to us, we pray; Cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord, Emmanuel!"

## Nothing Is Impossible: More JOY

Advent 3 ~ Luke 1:39-55

Rev. Rebekah Sweet

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Rather than to be angry with those who just haven't recognized God's love-gift in Christ Jesus – those who are still all-consumed with consuming – may we sing to them with JOY the good news that we hold dear today. For I believe that joyful songs of love in Christ can soften and warm even the hardest cold hearts of our world. Like the angels, you have great glad tidings to tell. May we sing it out this day! Thanks be to God!