

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth Bonforte Gardner
The Fourth Sunday of Advent (C)
Sunday, December 23, 2018

Micah 5:2-5a | Psalm 80:1-7
Hebrews 10:5-10 | Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

I'm going to be perfectly honest:

I'm not ready for Christmas.

I know we've had since Halloween to prepare.

But I'm just not ready yet.

And I just can't understand those of you out there who ARE ready.

You know who you are...

Those of you who grow more and more happy as we get nearer and nearer to Christmas!

When I see you I assume you must fall into one of two camps:

Either you understand completely the mystery of what is about to happen – that almighty God would give up power and glory and become finite and vulnerable...born to a poor, outcast mother – that you are not only aware of that awesome mystery but you comprehend it, too.

Or, and I like this camp better, you don't get it at all and you're ok with that.

Right now, I fall somewhere in the middle...that I know what I don't know.

And I'm finding this middle place to be particularly hard.

Because none of this makes sense.

Think about it!

To encounter God as God would be too terrifying for mere mortals to witness, let alone know.

So God comes to us as one of us: weak, frail, subject to disappointment and rejection, all so that we can understand that God is with us and for us and will never leave us.

Hard to believe?

Absolutely.

But we also know that anything worth having, anything worth doing, anything worth knowing, requires some work on our part.

It is like death and taxes – we can count on it.

Which is why the church gave us Advent – four weeks to get used to the idea that almighty God would do anything to convey to us God’s parental, enduring, and redeeming love.

And so in Advent, we are supposed to prepare our hearts and minds and even our homes to be surprised, yet again, by just how far God will go to reach us.

And yet...

I’m not ready.

Just, as I am sure, Mary and Elizabeth weren’t ready.

How could they be ready?

How could anyone be ready?

But what I love about these two women is not that they said, “Well of course God chose me... why not?! I’m perfect.”

Instead they were chosen, I believe, because they weren’t perfect.

What makes Mary and Elizabeth extraordinary is their ordinariness.

Young in a society that valued age.

Barren in a world that valued fertility.

Women in a civilization that valued men.

Humble in a time that valued stature.

And it is precisely this boldness by God to choose two people who were valued least that makes these miracles so miraculous.

Which is why I’m not ready for Christmas.

Because if God looks to the ordinary to be bearers of God’s extraordinary love, then that means God might also expect that from me.

God might choose me!

And God might choose you.

Can you imagine being overshadowed by the Holy Spirit?

Can you even begin to comprehend what it would feel like to be a part of something much bigger than ourselves?

To know there is a deeper reality, a hope, a mystery...

To feel connected to something no one can touch but everyone can feel.

I think Mary and Elizabeth knew just how ridiculous their situation was – two women, one too old to bear a child, one so young she was not even married yet...

And these two women were still called to bear children of promise through whom God would change the world.

I imagine they probably knew how little the world would pay attention to them...tucked away in the hill country of Judea, far from the courts of power and influence.

And they most certainly knew how hard life was under Roman oppression.

Yet when faced with these terrible odds...

They did not retreat,

They did not apologize.

They persevered.

They said, "Here I am."

So perhaps that is the key to Advent.

To just be present.

To focus not on what others might have, whether that is blessings or peace or readiness...whatever that might look like...

But to pause, just for a moment, and find our own deep need and longing for something more.

To look beyond ourselves for the divine.

Martin Luther wrote in the 1500's:

If Christ had arrived with trumpets and lain in a cradle of gold, his birth would have been a splendid affair.

But it would not be a comfort to me.

He was rather to lie in the lap of a poor maiden and be thought of little significance in the eyes of the world.

Now I can come to him.

Now he reveals himself to the miserable in order not to give any impression that he arrives with great power, splendor, wisdom, and aristocratic manners.

Advent is over.

Christmas is here.

I'm not ready for what that really means.

But that's ok.

Because God's love doesn't depend on my readiness.

God's love doesn't depend on my acceptance.

God's love doesn't even depend on my faith.

God's love will prevail despite me – what I do or say or believe.

Even though I feel ordinary, to remember it is God who will make me extraordinary.

Even though I'm not ready, to remember it is God who will make me ready.

And even if I don't fully get it, that's ok.

That's the message I need to be prepared to hear on Christmas.