



## Prophetic Reading: Micah 5:2-5a NRSV

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.

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.

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;

and he shall be the one of peace. If the Assyrians come into our land and tread upon our soil.

## Special Music

**Jazz Ensemble** (NW Jazz Orchestra)

## Lighting the Advent Candle

Pastor Glenn and Janet Dawson

**Pastor:** On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we consider who listens to the voices of the poor, who shares strength with the powerless, who surprises with forgiveness, and makes all things new?

**Janet:** Our Hope can be as fragile as an infant. Yet we remember the words of Mary this morning as she sings of the holiness of the God whose Incarnation lifted up the poor, satisfied the hungry, gave voice to the silent, grounded the oppressor, blessed the full-bellied with emptiness, and gave the gift of tears those who have never truly wept.

**Pastor:** Let us light this fourth candle of Advent, a candle of Love. In its light, let us think about our world, about wherever our God is longing to be born in peace, in joy, in freedom and in wholeness.

*(Pastor lights candle)*

**Janet:** Let this candle of Advent Love shine in our hearts all week and remind us to be midwives to Christ's birth in our work for justice, our practice of peace, our offering of forgiveness.

## Hanging of the Greens/Christmas Tree Lighting

## Hymn                    *O Little Town of Bethlehem*    191 (v. 1,3,4)

### A Time of Prayer

### Joys and Concerns

### Pastoral Prayer

Overwhelmed by the shadows of this world, O God Most High, we pause to remember and be centered within your power that overshadows all fears and iniquities. In your mercy, incline your heart to our prayer.

Your steadfast love is established forever: without fanfare or pride, yet omnipresent and glorious. We magnify you, by whom all generations are blessed.

We rejoice that in you is all goodness and life, O God Mysterious. Attune our lips to bless one another with hope; strengthen our resolve to serve you in kindness and generosity. Multiply grace upon grace to those who are burdened.

Your steadfast love is established forever: without beginning or end, yet partial to the hungry and the brokenhearted. We magnify you, in whom all things are possible.

We pray for the lost to find a companion, O God Incarnate, for the weary to know rest and the skeptical to catch visions, for the powerful to be undermined and unraveled, for your mercy to be remembered, embodied, shared in joy.

Your steadfast love is established forever: without shelter or source, yet always and everywhere. We magnify you, to whom is all glory forever and ever. Amen.

### Gospel Reading        **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 Mary's 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<sup>[a]</sup> a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary<sup>[b]</sup> 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.

## **Message – *Change Promised***

So are you all ready for Christmas? All those last minute items bought and wrapped? Grocery shopping done? Completely stress-free now, right? Unfortunately, there never seems to be enough time to get everything done that needs done. On top of that, as that day gets closer, often there are more and more gatherings and social commitments, in heavier and heavier traffic. Well, I hear they have that problem in other cities, unlike our smooth highway system here in Seattle. That is the one part of quarantine I miss, when there was virtually no one on the freeway. Sadly, that part has returned to normal.

For many, the stress level goes through the roof at this time of year. People with young families on normal days can feel pulled pretty thin, with both parents working and kids active in all sorts of sports, music, and other activities. Adding the “joy” of Christmas to that can really put people out of sorts. Unfortunately, this added stress can leave people feeling lonely and fragmented, as they try to add more to an already delicate juggling act of work and home life.

This morning I'd like us to take a step back and embrace this last Sunday of Advent, this last moment of waiting and reflection before the joy and celebration of Christmas, before all the cooking and cleaning up, before all the traveling and packing and unpacking the car. Take a deep breath and give some thought to the characters in our gospel story today.

Elizabeth and Mary know what it is to be stressed and out of sorts, in fact, they were probably the first to stress out over the holidays. By rights, neither one of them should be pregnant. Elizabeth is way past the time she should be worried about things like this, and Mary wasn't even married yet when this all started. In a patriarchal society like theirs, everything fell to them to handle with regards to their pregnancy. There weren't mommy groups and baby showers, la maz classes for them and their husbands.

Most likely, Zechariah and Joseph gave little thought to what their spouses were going through, men didn't worry about those things. It would be a lonely time for each of them. Yet they both were carrying babies that were both miracles in their own right. They knew they were doing God's work, and while that probably gave them a certain sense of being special, of having purpose, it also would be a little scary.

What did it all mean? These two marginalized women are the most unlikely of prophets, yet that's exactly what they become in today's lesson. The fact that a carpenter's wife and the wife of a sidelined priest issue some of the most poignant prophecy in the New Testament could almost be considered absurd by normal standards.

The image is extraordinary, almost comical. Young pregnant Mary gives voice to a song, called the Magnificat, for the ages, a song that invites beyond our realistic expectations and our numb imaginations. She herself seems amazed at what has happened, as her opening words indicate, "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." And the rest of her song announces the upside-down world that God has inaugurated. "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."

Mary proclaims the topsy-turvy future of God as an already accomplished fact – possibly because that future can already be glimpsed in God's choice of Mary as the bearer of the Messiah, this unimportant peasant girl from a backwater part of a backwater country. The song proclaims the reality and promise the singer embodies. In fact the song ironically foresees the end of the very social structures that give Mary some value in society, her ability to produce a son and male heir that would ensure her own welfare. As the book of Ruth makes clear, producing a male heir is what gave a woman value. The Magnificat was the inspiration for how the the Christmas holiday was observed for centuries, in celebrating what they called "The Feast of Fools."

The Feast of Fools, in fact, became a literal acting out of the Magnificat, an odd witness to the God whose inclination is to topple human power structures and to raise the downtrodden to a position of honor and feasting. Throughout medieval and early modern Europe, Christmas was a time for a festive reversal of status. These celebrations mocked the pretensions of the elite in both the church and society. As late as 1685, lay brothers and sisters would put their vestments on inside out, hold the books upside down, wore spectacles with orange peel rounds instead of lenses, blew the ashes from the sensors on each other and replaced the liturgy readings with gibberish.

Some may see that as sacrilegious but it was pointing out that God always reverses the roles of the proud and pretentious. The drawback of those fun and festive occasions was that they were just that, parties that made fun and lampooned the powers that be, but when the booze and party favors were gone, nothing had changed. The hungry and

downtrodden were still the hungry and downtrodden and the fat and proud were still fat and proud.

The change Mary prophesied, that the child she bore initiated, remained unfulfilled. The faithful that emerged from the Jesus movement initially started out on a good footing. They shared their resources with those in need, they helped their neighbors, often at the risk of their own well-being.

During plagues in Roman times, Christians stood out by risking their own health to care for those who were inflicted. However, they eventually became part of the power structure themselves. Under Constantine, they became the state religion of Rome. And with that recognition and acceptance, they soon adopted the same reasoning and rationale of the worldly powers that sponsored them. They went from the upside-down kin-dom of God to the Christendom based on this world's customs and values. They lost that separate sense of community and support.

When Mary went to visit Elizabeth, not only did they share prophesy, they shared support for each other. These two women struggling alone suddenly had a sense of community, of compassion and understanding for each other. They modeled what it means to be part of God's family, of being in community with each other. That may be one of the most important tenets of the faith that has been lost over time. So much of our focus today is on ourselves, on our own salvation, on our own needs. We often put our neighbor's needs off, or choose to not even see the need around us. How can we recapture that sense of caring community? Where can we model the upside down kin-dom of God that lifts the downtrodden and doesn't reward the rich and powerful?

Over the years, we've had a number of people seek shelter in various places around our church property. In the past, we've had campers outside on the front porch, making use of our outlet for a heater. To be honest, if this building only housed our church, I would have been tempted to look the other way and let people have a safe space to be warm and spend the night. However, we have a preschool here and I also have to ensure the safety and security of the children, parents, and staff as well. My question to you is, what can we do to be the community of faith, the representatives of God's kin-dom that we're called to be?

I can certainly work one on one with individuals to help them find resources. But what are we as a congregation willing and able to do to address the downtrodden who are sometimes literally on our doorstep? Are we willing to consider doing something like hosting a periodic community meal or making and delivering food to the camp down the street at the freeway exit? If that is not viable, what can we do? How can we partner with groups or other churches to share the resources we do have? What ideas do you have or what options can you imagine for us?

I've been preaching for a month now on the change we await that comes with the arrival of the Christ child tomorrow night. My challenge for you is how can we as people of God be that change for the least of these among us.

May God's spirit motivate and lead us to be the lights we are called to be in this world.  
Amen.

## **A Call to Serve**

The Love of God is born new in the world as often as we embody that love in the works of compassion, peace and justice. Let us offer our gifts in a spirit of generosity and hope to play in the work of creation.

## **A Time for Reflection**

### **The Prayer of Thanksgiving**

With these gifts, dear God, accept the praise and thanksgiving of our hearts, which rejoice in your goodness and love. Let our gifts point to your presence in the world, and further your dream for the world through Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us.  
Amen

**Hymn**      ***O Come, O Come, Immanuel***      **17**

### **Commissioning/Benediction** (responsive)

One: Never put your faith in worldly status, and never underestimate your heavenly importance.

**All: My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.**

One: Let your trust in the coming of Christ soar within you like wings of joy. Go out into the world and serve one another as God-bearers.

**All: My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.**

One: Grace, mercy and peace, from God our Creator, through Jesus our Saviour, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit our Nurturer, be with you this day and evermore.

**All: Amen!**

## **Postlude**