

Year C Advent 4  
Luke 1: 39-55  
The Rev. Denise Vaughn

## A SONG WORTH SINGING

It's almost here. For four very short weeks we have been waiting. We are almost to the crèche, almost peering into the human face of God's eternally self-giving love. As the world is frantically preparing for Christmas in shopping malls, on the internet and in glitzy catalogs, Advent has demanded from us a very different kind of preparation. Advent has demanded we sit back; we wait and prepare to believe. Prepare to hope and prepare to celebrate the birth of a child that our faith claims was the very God of the universe. Yet Advent, perhaps more than in any other season, requires we prepare for coming of the Christ child, by confronting our humanity.

Somehow we know we cannot go to the manger, that place of starlight and wonder, in anything less than our humanity. Yet, we also know we cannot enter the stable that is larger than the universe until we are willing to strip away all our old assumptions, our false standards and our determined prejudices. In the style of the Old Testament prophets before him, John the Baptist in Advent challenged us with a message of personal and corporate self-examination. He called us to prepare for the birth of this special baby by examining ourselves and our world. He reminded us that this is a time where we are preparing to welcome Jesus into our hearts and minds, into our lives.

Advent has reminded us we are preparing for two comings: God coming to earth in the infant Jesus at Christmas and Christ's returning to earth at a time we do not know in the future. We are waiting, but year after year our Christmas celebration reminds us that God does not stand at a distance, waiting for us to come to him. God has instead come all the way to us, and our waiting has been about the preparation of our hearts and minds to receive the God who is with us in Jesus our savior. At the manger and in the actions of two marginalized, pregnant women, we come face to face with the upside-down world brought about by the incarnation of Jesus.

Several years ago, Newsweek featured a story about the women of the bible and how their stories speak to us today. In the Mary and Elizabeth visitation scene in Luke's gospel, the author's write: "Mary has come to visit her cousin for three months. As Luke paints it, this is more than just a domestic interlude. Through Elizabeth, the history of the Old Testament will end with the last of the Hebrew prophets, John. Through Mary, a new history of salvation will begin with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In a powerful closing hymn, they write, Mary glories in a God who often uses the powerless-especially women-to accomplish his purposes. Acknowledging her "lowliness" as God's servant, she goes on to predict that henceforth "all generations will call me blessed."

There's seems to be something in all of us that loves to see the underdog finally get ahead, to see the little person bring down the big bully, or to share in the joy of the down and out who win the lottery. It is wonderful when the tables are turned and the haughty, mighty ones are toppled, especially by poor, simple souls lifted up when they've been downtrodden for so long. Such stories give us hope. As in a shepherd-boy named David who knocked down the towering Philistine giant Goliath with his slingshot and later went on to become the king of all Israel.

Or the prophet Micah, who spoke to his people in their turmoil to comfort them with the promise of another king who would rise from a little town called Bethlehem. A king who would feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, "they will live secure, for then his greatness will reach

to the ends of the earth and he will be their peace.” And we might remember in our present day, the work of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King. Such stories give us hope and they are so wonderful that they are worth singing about. Micah did and so did Mary of Nazareth.

Mary, the carpenter’s wife, housewife, and working-class mother to be, left her home in Galilee to spend time visiting her cousin Elizabeth, also soon to become a mother. As soon as Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the yet-unborn John the Baptist sensing the arrival of his Lord in his own blessed mother’s womb, leaped for joy. And Elizabeth, urged to prophetic utterance addressed Mary with “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

And that’s when Mary sang. This song repeated since, in every language on earth and sung to many different melodies throughout the world, is the song of all the little people, of all the underdogs. It is a reminder that our God is a mighty God who does great things, lifts up the lowly, afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted, fills the hungry with good things, but sends the rich away empty; and who, above all, is faithful to his promises.

In Mary’s song is summed up all the history of God’s chosen people, loved by a faithful God even when they were unfaithful; chosen, not because they were powerful, but because they were little and insignificant, they needed God. The advantage to being little is noticing things that people who are caught up in their own importance are too busy to see, or may forget to notice. Those who imagine themselves to be self-sufficient, in their riches and power, sometimes fail to remember how dependent they are on others and on God. The humble and meek have to keep their eyes open they pay attention because they know their lives depend on it and many are open to God’s work in their lives.

As Philips Brooks’s hymn says, “where the meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.” Everything is upside down in the incarnation. Barbara Brown Taylor Episcopal Priest and author writes concerning Mary’s song; “Where are these words coming from? She’s no politician, no revolutionary; she simple wants to sing a happy song, but all of a sudden she has become an articulate radical, an astonished prophet singing about a world in which the last have become first and the first, last. What is more, her song puts it all in the past tense, as if the hungry have already been fed, the rich already freed of their inordinate possessions. How can that be? Her baby is no bigger than a thumbnail, but already she is reciting his accomplishments as if they were history. Her faith is in things not seen, faith that comes to her from outside herself, and that is why we call her blessed.”

She was just a girl but she was also the mother of the son of God. She was like us and she was not like us. She had a faith that could move mountains. She wanted to thank God for visiting her and she ended up changing the future of the world. This is what Advent is all about. We are called on this fourth Sunday of Advent as we fast approach the manger, to incarnation. We bring our humanity to the manger, not to be changed or done away with but to be transfigured. If we are to live the Christ life to its fullest, we must strip away many things but we must also let in many things. The greatest of these things is love.

We know that love is the one thing God asks of us; yet, how hard it is to love God “with all our heart and mind and soul and to love our neighbor as ourselves.” We are to love, as God loves, a love that Mary sang about. A love that gives without reserve and without condition and such love doesn’t come easily to any of us. Because letting love into our lives means we have to put aside our anger, our judgmentalism, our jealousies, our pride, our hurts and our sorrows and all the other things that we have convinced ourselves are necessary for our identity.

For us to be able to go to the manger where we find true and unfailing love we have to become like Mary, ready to risk all in order to do God’s will. Or be like Joseph, whose love was

stronger than all the feelings he felt of doubt and betrayed pride. Or like the shepherds and wise men who risked having their lives undone but still went to worship the newborn king.

Yes, Advent has demanded from us a very different kind of preparation. It has demanded we sit back, we wait and prepare to believe, but it has demanded we risk looking honestly at ourselves and our world. God made us to share in Jesus' saving, healing and redeeming work. And can any of us here this morning look at our world around us and not see God's love is needed. We cannot stand aside because it is only in the midst of the pain of this world will we find Christ at work.

We can be like Mary. We can open our hearts to God and to each other, to receive the love that was willing to risk all and did on a cross to show us unconditional love. It's not easy to become little when we've gotten used to living large but everything is upside down. Prepare to hope, make your hearts ready, let us not neglect to love, for only then we will be ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus and to receive our Lord into our lives. It is a song worth singing.