

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Luke 1:39-45

Pastor Louder

Let us pray,

O holy child of Bethlehem

Descend on us we pray

Cast out our sin and enter in

Be born in us today.

In your Holy Name we pray. Amen

Well, it's almost here, isn't it? In about 24 hours most of us will start morphing with some vigorousness into that for which we have been waiting. Decorations have been put up, thoughtful gifts purchased, and the wrapping completed (or at least, it should be).

But, it's not here yet. Today it's still Advent and as we approach the conclusion of the Advent season, today we wait. We wait with Mary for the most remarkable, most influential birth in human history.

So, today as the "not yet" begins to dissolve into the "already," in typical Louder fashion, there are three facets to my ponderings on today's Gospel. First, how did Mary wait for Jesus that first Advent? Then what did her kinswoman, Elizabeth, reveal to us that is so important about Mary? And finally, what might this say to you and me about our own Advent? Or if you are into the short form: Mary's waiting, Elizabeth's revelation, our anticipation.

First, how did Mary wait for Jesus that first Advent? The answer is easy. The Gospel is revealing. Mary waited...pregnant. What does she do? Great with child, she doesn't retire in isolation. She goes into the hill country to visit a relative, Elizabeth (or Liz as her family called her [that's how I imagine it]), wife of the High Priest, Zechariah.

Now we, the graying and balding among us Lutherans have been told since childhood why Mary went visiting. She wanted to congratulate Liz on her unexpected pregnancy and help the aging lady during her last few months with child. Those of the contemporary estrogen set see it differently. They say Mary was seeking support from another pregnant woman. It make's sense. Mary had never been pregnant and she was pregnant not by Joseph but by God's creative and active power. That makes Mary the mother of the Son of God. She could hardly tell that story to any of her down-to-earth friends in backwater Nazareth. "Gather around girls: I've just been made pregnant by the Holy Spirit." (Like that story is going to fly.) So, whom to tell but another woman some distance away, an older woman, a relative that was "just" before God, one who was beyond childbearing years, a woman also surprised by God.

I don't think the reason has to be one or the other. I think it's possible that it was both – Mary congratulating Elizabeth and Mary telling her story to one she could trust.

Mary's visit is hardly the whole story. Mary pregnant. Elizabeth pregnant. Mary seeking support from Elizabeth. Support she does receive but far beyond her imagining. As soon as Mary enters Elizabeth's home, the child in Elizabeth's womb (John, the baptizer-to-be) leaps in delight. By a miracle of Grace, the unborn child of Elizabeth recognizes not his cousin but his Lord. And, Elizabeth recognizes not only her kinsman but the mother of her Lord, "Why should this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?"

But Elizabeth isn't finished. "Blessed indeed," she cries, "blessed is the woman who has believed that what the Lord has promised her will see fulfillment." Here Mary is at her most remarkable. She believed. She trusted that what the God had promised her would be realized.

Ponder with me on the utter trust in Mary's simple response "Let it be with me as you say." Gabriel had not left her with a life script. No details whatsoever. He never told her she would become a refugee with her infant son to escape a king's anger, that when her child would grow up some of his relatives would think him mad, or that the people of Nazareth would try to throw him off a cliff. The angel never mentioned to Mary that some of his fellow Jews would charge him with being a devil, that one of his close friends would betray him with a kiss or that he would die shamefully on a cross between two thieves (not to worry because he would rise again shortly).

God only asked of Mary this – trust me. And she did – totally. That is why Luke sees in Mary the perfect disciple. Mary listened, and Mary did. And, because Mary believed, in her believing she conceived. In other words, the human act whereby she conceived her son was not an act of loving union with her husband but an act of a loving faith in God. What did she do to conceive? She said "yes" to God without reservation.

Why this focus on Mary's believing? The answer to that brings us to our third question: What might of this say to you and me about our own Advent, our waiting for the Christ? In a word, we too are asked to believe. Advent for us is preparation for a strong act of faith. But be careful. It is not only an act of the intellect – I accept with my mind what God has revealed to me, namely, that the infant in the stable is the unique Son of God, God in our flesh. Important? You bet it is, our Christian living, our Christian dying depends on it.

No, Christmas is the incredible creed you and I are accustomed to proclaiming: "I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary." Still, for all its splendor, that affirmation is only the beginning of my faith – an important truth but not the whole truth. With that response of my intellect must also go a response of my whole person. An act of trust similar to Mary's is required. I must trust as Mary trusted.

Admittedly, that's not easy. Nevertheless, as with Mary, so with you and me. In Jesus, God did not provide any of us even a glimpse of how our lives would play out. God didn't tell us what color would grace our face, what manner of children would be born of us, whether we shall live in poverty or plenty, in love or rage, when we shall die or how. None of us can predict our tomorrow.

Well, what then has God promised in that child of Bethlehem? He promised that the God who wore our flesh will never abandon us, will always be there for us no matter how absent he seems, no matter how far we stray, how faithless we may be. For you that means that even if you desert him, he will never

wave good goodbye to you. The power of the Most High, God's Holy Spirit, will always cast a shadow over you and that shadow is the sense of God's presence in your life.

You see, discipleship, like grace, doesn't come cheap. But for your own comfort and strength, be aware that you wait like Mary with your Lord already within you. Remember the words of Jesus that if you love him and keep his word, his Father loves you and they will come to you and make their home with you. Jesus deep in you – Jesus all around you. With that your whole life can be a ceaseless Advent, a splendid prelude to his final coming.

All you have to do is murmur with Mary, "Whatever you say, Lord" and then do whatever he says.

That's all? Yep that's all.

Isn't it so?