

# SERMON

by Rev. Emily Chapman

December 18, 2011

*(Fourth Sunday in Advent, Year B - 2011)*

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



## ST. PAUL'S

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**Lectionary Texts:** 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:47-55; Romans 16:25-27; and Luke 1:26-38

## **Luke 1:47-55**

*<sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup>for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. <sup>50</sup>His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup>He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup>He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup>he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. <sup>54</sup>He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup>according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”*

One of my favorite Christmas movies is National Lampoon’s *Christmas Vacation*. I think I like it because it is a parody of the absurd expectation of a perfect Christmas. If you haven’t seen the movie, Chevy Chase plays Clark Griswold, a father trying to give his family the perfect Christmas. They go off on a long trek into the woods to find the perfect tree, only to realize he has forgotten the saw. Then there are the strands of lights that won’t work, all the abrasive relatives, and nothing going the way it’s supposed to go. It reminds of the year we drove from my family’s house near Dallas to east Texas to cut a tree, only to get caught in a storm and see our just-cut tree blow off the roof of the car and go rolling down Interstate 20 like a giant tumbleweed. Not quite what we planned.

Christmas has become a season not just of too much stuff, but of too much pushing for perfection. I have been reading a book this month called *Christmas Is Not Your Birthday*, a book that challenges the reader to live and to give like Jesus. I sort of thought I knew how the book was going to play out, but chapter two, called “Giving Up on Perfect,” caught me a little off guard. I hadn’t really thought about

how all our marathon shopping, party hopping, and decorating come from a drive to create the perfect holiday for us and for our families. That need to perfection might be the thing that makes us miss the whole point. No matter how meticulously we plan or how hard we try to force perfection, it never fails that someone doesn't get the gift they wanted, one of the toys is already broken, Uncle Ed drank way too much, and Mom called Dad a bad word. Life isn't much of Norman Rockwell painting most of the time.

So what would it mean for us to let go of perfect?

It might draw us into the story of Mary a bit more... and the story of Joseph and the story of our Savior for whose birth we are preparing. All of them show us that God comes to us in times and places that are far from perfect. But today we hear the story of Mary. Our Catholic brothers and sisters regard Mary as sinless, an exemplar, a truly extraordinary woman. For us though, it is precisely Mary's "ordinariness" that we like. Subject to the same sins, the same fears and insecurities as us, she is able to respond to God with profound faithfulness. But her life is not perfect. She is a poor teenager from a nowhere town. Scripture calls Mary the favored one. Not perfect, favored. God's favor can't be earned through force of effort. Sometimes God's favor comes to someone like Mary, who you wouldn't really expect.

The story goes that an angel of the Lord appears to Mary. "Do not be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God." With that pronouncement, the angel Gabriel proceeds to outline an absurd situation. Mary briefly questions the angel's proclamation, to which the angel reminds her "nothing is impossible with God." Then Mary says, "here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." And that's that. Mary did not have everything in order. Her plans for her life would not have included all this that angel told her.

But when Mary hears from the angel, instead of flying into a tizzy because this was not what she planned and she was not prepared and how was she going to tell her family and what would Joseph say, she sings a song of praise which is one of the most powerful pieces of scripture we have, and one of the few we have in a woman's voice. It is our Psalm for the day and is called the *Magnificat*, Mary's song of praise.

Her response is at least in part a powerful expression of hope in the face of a world that is far from perfect. The Kingdom that God has promised to Israel is coming to pass...and the only response for this incredible gift of hope is praise. My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

Mary is our example of so many things, but I think for us this Advent season, we might look to her as a model of astonishment. She is astonished at the appearance of the angel and at the work of God in her life and so she turns her spirit to praise, proclaiming a great turning around, a revolution of God's action in the world.

For the most part, I am afraid we have forgotten what it means to be astonished by anything. We are de-sensitized to most of the violence of pain that we see on television, we are able to easily overlook and move beyond the suffering that is given for our constant 24-hour-a-day consumption. On top of which, we are really too busy, especially at this time of year to notice things around us.

But that is not the most alarming thing.

What is even more alarming is that we have forgotten what it is to be astonished by God. Robert Capon, an Episcopal priest from New York, said that the most critical issue facing Christians today is “not abortion, pornography, the disintegration of the family, moral absolutes, MTV, drugs, racism, sexuality, or school prayer. The critical issue today is dullness. We have lost our astonishment. The Good News is no longer good news, it is okay news. Christianity is no longer life-changing, it is life enhancing. Jesus doesn't change people into wild-eyed radicals anymore; He changes them into ‘nice people...’”

I am not suggesting that we all become wild-eyed radicals...though I would argue that there are worse things. However, I do think he is onto something, and Advent is the perfect time to practice it. After all, it's the one time of year we look to Mary and have this example of what it means to be beautifully astonished by God – because she knows from whom her hope comes. Her use of the past tense to describe the work of her unborn child is disarming. I know that my parents had dreams for my life long before I was born, but Mary speaks of a mission that is

already accomplished — “he has shown strength...he has scattered the proud...he has brought down the powerful...and lifted up the lowly...he has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty...he has helped his servant Israel.”

In this song the whole past, present, and future of God is proclaimed. She brings history into present reality so that we ourselves may experience it and at the same time draws a vision of the future into the present. This is what Advent is all about. Remembering the past, looking to the promise to come, and celebrating God’s presence in the world now. Not just celebrating it, but allowing ourselves to be astonished by it.

Mary had eyes that saw the future and saw the significance of what was happening in the world right then, in spite of everything she saw. That is the message friends. God does not wait for the perfect time or place or person. God came to us right in the middle of the messiness of the world, in a dusty crowded city, born to young parents who were surely almost too overwhelmed to function. And still comes to messy places, to places and people who are far from perfect with the Good News that unto us a Savior has been given, which is Christ the Lord.

In his Christmas message this year, the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams reminds us that no Christmas is perfect, not even the first one. He closed with these words: “I’m never sure whether to wish anyone a peaceful Christmas, because it hardly ever is. But I can wish you joy in the midst of the mess, and every blessing from the God of ordinary, untidy, surprising things.”

So as we leave today, I will not wish you a peaceful Christmas, because it probably won’t be. But I will wish you a blessed season of seeing the presence of our Savior in the messiness of this world, where he is pleased to dwell with us.