

TWO WOMEN TALKING

Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston

December 20, 2009

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.

(Fourth Sunday of Advent)



ST. PAUL'S

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Lectionary Texts:

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:47-55; Hebrews 10:5-10; and Luke 1:39-45

Luke 1:39-55

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

⁴⁶And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Often at this time of year, you will hear people say things like it is just too busy or hectic or secular or harsh. I understand that sentiment, and there is certainly some truth to it. And sometimes people add, it just doesn't seem like Christmas. If you've ever said things like that yourself, let me offer a little different take on things today.

It is the real world that God loves and into which Jesus is born. If you think about the story of the birth of Jesus, things were busy and hectic and secular and harsh, just like today. Just like all times, really. That's the point of the story. The holy

family was away from home in a city where lots of people had come to register for taxes. That must have put everybody in a good mood; being away from home in a crowded city so you could register to pay taxes to the Romans. On top of all that, Joseph and Mary were expecting a baby at any moment, and as the story says, there was no room in the inn. Life has always been busy and hectic and secular and harsh.

Our story is that it is precisely into that kind of world that God comes to bring hope. The hope comes in the form of a baby and eventually a grown up Jesus who embodies the love of God in the real world. Jesus is God's assurance to us that we are not alone and that we are loved. What else do you need?

So Christmas is unfolding as it should this year, as it always has, when people burdened by the cares of life are surprised by joy and hope. Today, the scriptures of the fourth Sunday in Advent set the stage. The prophet speaks of a birth in Bethlehem and the Epistle speaks of the mission of the Christ. The Gospel texts from Luke, including the reading and the canticle, focus on the approaching birth. Luke records two women talking about the birth of joy and hope. Both women are pregnant; Elizabeth is six months farther along than Mary. Elizabeth is pregnant with John the Baptist, and Mary of course is pregnant with Jesus. Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, are getting on in years and have been unable to have children until now. And Mary is young, very young, and you know what the angel has said to her. Mary and Elizabeth are somehow related, and Mary's first instinct, after the annunciation of all that is to be her calling in life, is to go talk to her kinswoman, Elizabeth. Mary is in Nazareth in Galilee, in the North of Israel, and Elizabeth is in an unnamed Judean village thought by tradition to be not far from Jerusalem. It is a pretty good trek for one pregnant woman to walk to talk to another pregnant woman. But after all, they had a lot to talk about.

In Christian tradition and in the world of art, the conversation between Mary and Elizabeth referred to as *The Visitation*. Mary's visit to Elizabeth lasted for three months. John would have been born just after Mary left, apparently. Perhaps it would be helpful to get in our minds Luke's timeline in the Christmas story. First, the angel Gabriel informs Zechariah and Elizabeth that they will have a child in their

old age. Annunciation, number one. Then six months later, the same angel, Gabriel, announces to Mary that she will have a child and the circumstances under which the child will be born. The Annunciation, as we call it. It is after these two occurrences that Mary sets out to visit Elizabeth as outlined in our reading for today. Mary's response to all that is happening is called the Magnificat. John is then born and dedicated in the temple and then Chapter Two of Luke's Gospel unfolds with the trip to Bethlehem, the shepherds and angels' chorus and the birth of Jesus. Mary and Elizabeth indeed had a lot to talk about.

Now all of this happens, as Luke tells us, when Herod is ruler in Jerusalem and Augustus was the emperor in Rome. Interestingly, Herod, by decree of the Roman Senate, was referred to as "King of the Jews" and the Emperor's name, Augustus, meant "The Divine One." You know from the beginning there is going to be a conflict with the secular authorities. The Romans knew who was the King of the Jews and who was considered to be divine. This is the world into which Jesus is born. Mary's words in the Magnificat challenge the status quo. In the words of our Canticle today, God scatters the proud in their conceit and brings down the mighty from their thrones. God fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich empty away. Little wonder that when in a few days after the birth of Jesus the wise men from the east arrive and inquire about the King of the Jews, and it was clear they did not mean Herod, you can be sure it caught his attention.

In the real world it didn't seem much like Christmas at the first Christmas either.

A seminar recently held in Houston was titled, "Empty Pews: Why Houston Christians Don't Go To Church." It was conducted by George Barna, the well-known church researcher and consultant. The seminar was in response to a survey that Barna had conducted with self-identified Christian people in the Houston area who do not attend church. Here are some of the things that the survey revealed. Houston's unchurched Christians are highly educated; 65 percent have some college education and have a household income of over \$50,000 per year. They are in every age range, but many are young or middle aged. Most of the unchurched people in

the survey expressed considerable interest in God, faith, scripture and church life. Over half had favorable views of Christianity and four out of five used to belong to a church. The unchurched Christians in Houston just quit going to church because in the finding in the survey, “they didn’t receive any value from going to church or felt rejected by the church or have not found an appealing church.”

When asked what would make you more interested in attending church, the most frequent response was “when a friend invites me.” The most likely reason unchurched people in Houston would come to church is if a friend they like or respect invites them. Now I know that is not always the easiest thing for you to do, and it needs to be done in a context, but I hope you will be alert for the right time to invite a friend to church.

Of course we have to be a place that demonstrates radical hospitality and engages the real world. There are people in Houston who might not go to another church, who would come here if you invited them. “Traditional Worship for Contemporary People.” It looks and feels like church here, yet we fully engage the contemporary world. We don’t all think alike, but we are not afraid of science or intellectual pursuits or issues like immigration reform or health care reform or inclusiveness in our churches, or interfaith dialogue or ministry to those in need.

Tony Campolo tells the story of being in a city away from home on a speaking engagement. He is a preacher and social worker in Philadelphia, PA. In a strange city he couldn’t sleep, so he went to an all night diner. As he was getting something to eat, some of the ladies of the evening came in. He overheard one say, “Tomorrow is my birthday, but no one ever makes me a cake.” So he asked the manager if the ladies would be back the next day. The manager said he was sure they would because they come in every night. So Campolo said, “Well, OK. I’ll bake a cake and bring some balloons tomorrow, and we’ll have a birthday party for this lady.” The manager says, “Who are you?” Campolo says, “I’m a preacher who would bake a cake for a prostitute at midnight.” The manager says, “Man, I’d go to a church like that!”

That’s who we must be. Radical hospitality and not afraid of our world.
Just like the birth of Jesus, church happens in the real world, too.

The Christmas story ought to be our story every Sunday, that every now and then, sometimes when you least expect it, joy and hope break into the real world, and God's love makes a difference in someone's life. The story of Christmas is the story of God's love engaging the hard realities of life and not being overcome. If it just seems too busy or hectic or secular or harsh, that is exactly the time and place where God breaks in with hope.

Our message to the real world is that a light has shined in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Mary and Elizabeth had a lot to talk about, and so do you and I.

Merry Christmas.