

Advent 4 December 20, 2009

Lections: Micah 5:2-5a; Ps. 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45

(Highlighting old and young, the rector shared the sermon with the diocesan youth officer and parish member, Andrew Stephens-Rennie)

He sat at the end of the table, a hollowed out bishop, exercising his last action before retirement due to post-traumatic stress disorder. The former bishop of Louisiana addressed the young people in front of him, telling them of the blessing, the importance of their faith and encouraging them to be open to encounters with others. I heard him say that their meetings with those who have been hit with disaster, with abandonment by every level of government – that meetings with the marginalized and doing what they can will restore the dignity and respect of every human being that we proclaim in our baptismal promises. What an outrageous claim on the surface of it – that the faith of the young will have consequences of good for years to come. That people will respond to the recognition of mutual status as the beloved of God – old and young, sick and well made a sanctuary in that meeting room while just a few feet away a men's choir was rehearsing the Messiah and the remnants of gingerbread house building decorated the table.

Today's gospel gives us an unlikely message as well. A young unmarried pregnant woman runs off to the hill country to see what God is doing in another. The encounter between Mary and Elizabeth is called the visitation. Both are pregnant with the holy – one bears the prophetic messenger and the other bears the prophetic message himself. They respond to each other, to the recognition of God at work in each other. They create a sanctuary, a place where the truth of God can be held and the unexpected produces hope. How wonderful to see God at work in someone else and to name it, to bless it and respond. They need each other to affirm what is and what is yet to be. Their faith is magnified. The unexpected future of God depends in no small part on this companionship and the dignity and respect for the roles each one is needed to play in the unfolding dream and drama of God.

Our fourth Advent banner, designed by Sandy Franklin, gives us another image of the unfolding story incarnated in each of us. Advent us we asked in the first week's banner; make a new beginning of finding our own stories as God pitches a home in us. The story is shown moving into our hearts, the Holy resting there to be recognized, blessed, sung over, prayed and proclaimed in young and old together. I think this means we also get to be hollowed out a bit and to be invited to respond to the folks in front of us. As an older woman whose physical childbearing was long ago, it is a joy to recognize and bless the faithfilled new births in others, and to greet and bless and make room. (Linda's portion).

It's not easy to get news like this. It's not easy to get news that changes your life, shifts everything, turns everything upside down. It's not easy. And I don't know that it ever will be. I don't know much about giving birth, but from everything I've heard I think it's safe to say there's no small amount of pain involved. There's pain and then there's finding a good midwife in Bethlehem.

This week I tried to get into Mary's story, into the overwhelming anxiety and excitement of it all. And as God always seems to do, God sent messengers and messages into my life to help me enter in – however inconvenient they were.

This was a week of bad news after bad news. At a Christmas party on Thursday came the shocking news of a colleague's sudden death. Cancer followed by a heart attack. Add to this, two members of my family fighting the disease, and then my dad's call yesterday morning telling me that yes, he too has cancer, and no, we don't yet know how bad it is.

There's a reason this season feels more like Lent than Advent this year. The Saviour is about to be born, yet all creation groans in travail while we await our redemption.

This morning in the midst of this community we hear Mary's story. Once again, God's favour looks less than favourable.

Pregnancy is no favour for a 13 year old unwed teenager in a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish world. Try telling her about God's blessing and plan for her life when she's getting kicked out of the house, and being shunned by her community.. Sugar coat it and slap on a trite Hallmark greeting if you want, but his is not the makings of a teen's dream-come-true.

As I got deeper into Mary's story it became clear to me that she *needs* Elizabeth. Shunned by those closest to her she needs to share the mysterious, miraculous story of God's unpredictable favoritism.

I realized this week that Mary's story is my own story. If I'm to be a vessel of good news in my own community – in my family, in this city, in this parish, in my circle of relationships – I cannot do it alone. I need a safe place to be affirmed in my calling, and encouraged to listen for God's inconvenient call on my life. I need to enter into community with people who are just as crazy as me, people who have also opened themselves to the transforming power of the gospel.

Spending a few days this week with the Rev. Rich Clark, my friend and counterpart from Louisiana, we spoke about how the floodwaters of Katrina have mobilized a diocese to embrace God's mission for others. What once looked like an impossible situation, has turned people around to fight battles anew for the dignity of the people of that diocese.

At times, it's hard to reach out. It requires humility. It requires a realization that I cannot make it on my own. It takes a whole village, they say, to raise a child. It takes a whole parish to birth the gospel. It requires partnership, deep community, and oftentimes, inconvenience to bring good news in the midst of struggle.

I look to my parents who struggled with telling me of my father's illness. They didn't want to be inconvenient. They didn't want to ruin Christmas. In vulnerability, and in reaching out to someone who would understand that pain, they allowed for healing and growth and transformation for all of us.

If I've learned anything about the Christmas story this week, it's that it is incredibly inconvenient and that it drives us deeper into community with those who share the same story. (Andrew's portion).

You could say that these past few weeks have all been about visitation. Members of parish council have had visits with many or most of you about the ministry and mission of this parish. Perhaps there has been some inconvenience – to do the visits in this season and to make room for the visits as well. Sometimes the visits have met with unhappiness – in young or old. Sometimes our faith has been encouraged. All of our times together are meant to be times of deep connection in the One who is always meeting us in love, giving us each other in relationship, offering promises of blessing, of companionship in community. May we meet the inconvenient Christ and his new birth in all of our hearts. Amen. (Linda's portion)

The Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera  
Andrew Stephens-Rennie

(Today's liturgy included the renewal of our baptismal promises)