

20 December 2015 (Fourth Sunday of Advent)
Lafayette Presbyterian Church
“Signs of Fulfillment”
Luke 1:39-55

My husband and I are fortunate enough to have two grandsons, Lucas and Samuel. They are ages three and two, respectively. They are, of course, beautiful children, and highly intelligent—just look at their parents, and their grandparents. They are also strong-willed. The other day, watching my son and daughter-in-law patiently repeat instructions to say “please” and “thank you,” “yes, ma’am” and “yes, sir,” I got to thinking how hard it is to be human. Each of us begins life determined to have our own way. As well behaved as most of us sitting here this morning have become, we did not start out as such. Someone taught us, or we learned the hard way when nobody wanted to be around us because we were so obnoxious. Learning to listen to other people, realizing that we don’t know everything, respecting those with more experience who just might know a thing or two that we don’t, is a painful process. Learning our life’s chosen discipline, whether it’s writing, playing the piano, or understanding accounting, takes years. But it also takes submission and humility. At some point, if we’re going to succeed at something, or if we’re going to influence the world for good, we must remove ourselves from the center of the universe. We must become partners with others, and we must submit our wills to God.

As we near the end of Advent and prepare to receive Christ’s birth in us and for us, we are faced with a challenge, the same challenge that has faced every generation of saints. What difference will Christ’s birth make in our lives? How will Christ’s incarnation be fulfilled in us? The models before us are Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John the baptizer whose pregnancy, according to Luke, was as surprising and as dramatic as Mary’s. But like the marginalized, disenfranchised crowds to whom John the baptizer preached his baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, Mary and Elizabeth are unlikely candidates to speak from a position of authority and power. As the wife of a priest, Zechariah, Elizabeth was unable to conceive for many years, and she would hardly have been considered a role model of motherhood by the religious community of her day. And as for Mary, here is a very young woman, not yet married, who finds herself pregnant and therefore automatically on the defensive in her community. This is not a good way to begin her family life. How could they have been models for their generation, much less for us? What do Mary and Elizabeth have to teach us about how God’s will is fulfilled in our lives?

In the text before us this morning from Luke’s Gospel, we have an apparently unremarkable visit by a young woman to her older cousin. Both women are expecting children, and so it seems natural that they should spend time together to support each other. And yet, when they meet, Elizabeth’s child greets his second cousin as though he already knows who he is. That is when Elizabeth and Mary become more than mothers of children. That is when Elizabeth and Mary become fellow disciples chosen by God to fulfill God’s salvation long ago foretold by the prophets—because, even before they are born, John and Jesus, through their mothers, become partners in mission. What Elizabeth

and Mary have to teach us is what it means to submit to God's will for our lives. For without that, God's incarnation cannot be welcomed, and God's salvation cannot be fulfilled.

More than any other Gospel, Luke represents for us the real physicality of the incarnation: Jesus was born to a mother the way we are all born. Mary not only had to carry him for nine months, she also had to understand who he really was. Her visit to her cousin, Elizabeth, confirmed that—and the recognition of that confirmation is what we hear from Mary's lips in this Gospel text before us this morning, a recognition that defied words alone, a recognition that required music in order to give it its full expression. In these verses that we have heard from Luke's Gospel, we have Mary's full assent and realization of what God was about to do in the world, nothing short of the fulfillment of God's salvation foretold by the prophets.

This morning, as we stand on the threshold of God's incarnation in us and for us, we are privileged to celebrate a baptism. I cannot think of a more fitting counterpoint to Mary's song of praise in Luke's Gospel than the opportunity to welcome a new disciple on her journey with Christ. How blessed we are as a community of faith! Months ago, as I was pondering these texts and identifying themes to emphasize, I wasn't planning for the sacrament of baptism on the fourth Sunday of Advent, it just happened as a result of the grace of God touching Rhonda Siplin's life, in the same way that the grace of God captured Mary and Elizabeth. But how fitting—and how important an opportunity it presents to each of us to reaffirm our baptisms, whenever they took place, and however young or old we may have been.

In his Letter to the Hebrews, that author's aim was to explore what difference it makes that Jesus was born to be like us, and what difference it makes that he was the incarnation of God. And the answer he offers is that Jesus was strong willed, and that he completely submitted his will to God in perfect obedience. Jesus wasn't a robot. He wasn't unlike us. At some point, he was a strong-willed toddler who had to learn how to work and play well with others. As a young man he retreated to the wilderness to figure out the pitfalls and temptations of his vocation. He had to come to terms with God's claim upon his life. And the significance of his understanding of his identity is that he saw his own self, his very body, as the ultimate sacrifice that God required. That is the point of the text before us in Hebrews. It is also what Mary understood during that visit to her cousin, Elizabeth. When we give ourselves to God, we have a savior and an advocate, a redeemer and friend, who walks beside us and lives within us. We are never lonely disciples, struggling on our own efforts to be good people. We have a great high priest, as the author of Hebrews described him, who continually intercedes for us before God, and who serves as that indispensable bridge between the God we seek and the God whose holiness exposes our guilt. Because of Jesus Christ, when we confess our sin, and when we confess our faith, we aren't merely talking to ourselves. Our confessions are heard, we are forgiven, and we are given strength for the journey of discipleship.

I sometimes hear people in the church talk about the importance of trying harder to be good Christians, or of working to forgive others, or of striving to be better people.

According to the Gospel of Christ, those ideas are all wrong. The most important thing we do as Christ's disciples is not to try harder by our own efforts to be like Christ, but rather to submit our wills to God so that Christ can live through us. To put it differently, the more we can get out of the way and let Christ shine through our lives, the more closely we are following the will of God. Neither Mary nor Elizabeth generated the grace of God on their own: they received the grace of God and let it take root in their lives. We are invited to do the same. On this threshold Sunday before Christmas, on which we are each so fortunate to reaffirm our baptisms through the commitment of one of our sisters in faith, I urge you to let God's light and joy shine into every corner of your life so that God's salvation might capture the world.



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