

Primary Text: Luke 1.39-45 [46-55]

“I have been wondering, what does it mean that the infinite, Almighty God chose to come into our lives as a tiny, helpless child?” writes Bishop Munib Younan in his *Christmas Message from Jerusalem*. Munib Younan is the Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. He continues in his *Christmas Message*, “What does it mean that Jesus was born, not in the comfort and luxury of the city, but on the outskirts of a little town called Bethlehem? What does it mean that God came first to the poor shepherds, stable folk and animals and not to the privileged and powerful?”

In our Gospel lesson for today, we hear exactly what Bishop Younan is speaking about. In fact, in our lesson, Jesus is not yet even a tiny, helpless child. But at this point in the story, Jesus – the divine person – is still a tiny, helpless being in Mary’s womb, dependent on Mary for all nourishment, vulnerable to everything which Mary is vulnerable. What does it mean that the “infinite, Almighty God chose to come” as the essence of vulnerability?

Indeed, we’ve made a surprising chronological step backwards in Luke’s story. The last few weeks of Advent our Gospel lessons have come from the third chapter of Luke. Lessons which involved John the Baptist *crying out in the wilderness*, “*Prepare!*” Stories of John proclaiming that one more powerful is coming; one who will *baptize with the Holy Spirit*.

So it’s an unexpected leap backwards that we take today to the first chapter of Luke and hear this story of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth – two women about to give birth to two boys we’ve already seen as grown adults: John the Baptist and Jesus.

But maybe it’s an appropriately unexpected leap backwards. Just as many families gather together these days and remember and retell the stories of our families. Stories that often begin with words like: “I remember the first Christmas when you were born...” or “Do you remember the first Christmas we were together after grandpa died?” And so these little stories are told over these days, a piece at a time; weaving backward and forward in time, and eventually are quilted in to the very foundation of our celebrations.

But besides this unexpected leap we take backwards in the story of Luke –a step which actually takes us closer to the celebration of Christmas – there is a strange tension in which we worship this morning. It is December 24 – a day we generally know as Christmas Eve. And yet, because of how days land on calendars, today is both Christmas Eve and the Fourth (and the last) Sunday of Advent. We worship today in time that is like a hinge – a pivot between Advent and Christmas; a turning point between time for preparation and time of celebration.

Living in community, I think we are no strangers to this tension; often we are just not aware of it. As individuals, some of us wait while others celebrate. Some celebrate new life, at the same time that others grieve the death of a loved one. Some are grateful for the gathering of family while others wait to be gathered with family members in another time.

In fact, it is a funny and maybe impossible thing – as we sit on the axis between this four weeks of Advent & these 12 days of Christmas – to try to get all of our individual lives to line up on the same spiritual landscape. To assume with all the things that are going on in each of our lives that we could come together as a spiritual community and turn our hearts to the work of preparation in Advent and celebration in Christmas is a little like trying to get a whole herd of buffalo through narrow doors in to a corral the size of this sanctuary.

But this is what happens in families at the birth of a child. For one day, everyone is united with one concern. And maybe part of living and being in a worshipping community is gathering all of our waiting and preparation, our rejoicing and celebration into one body and one concern. A body like Mary's which becomes ripe with divine presence in its womb. We're united with one concern, despite the fact that some of us come with hearts weighed down by sadness others come with hearts lifted in joy. Despite this, we're united with one concern as God's presence is revealed, is magnified, in mysterious and unexpected ways.

Later in the *Christmas Letter* from the Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, Bishop Younan relates a story of two brothers who live close to each other and yet are in very different situations. The story goes:

*Two brothers live on either side of a hill. One is wealthy but has no family; the other has a large family but limited wealth. The rich brother decides one night that he is blessed with goods and, taking a sack of grain from his silo, carries it to the silo of his brother. The other brother decides that he is blessed with many children, and since his brother should at least have wealth, he takes a sack of grain from his silo and carries it to that of his brother. Each night they go through this process, and every morning each brother is astounded that he has the same amount of grain as the day before. Finally one night they meet at the top of the hill and realize what's been happening. They embrace and kiss each other. And at that moment a heavenly voice declares, 'this is the place where I can build my house on earth.'*

“I’ve got half a ham in the freezer and a can of sweet potatoes in the pantry; if I can’t make a meal out of that for Christmas, then I’m not trying hard enough...It wouldn’t be the first Christmas I’ve been alone...” says the old bachelor I visited this week in the cabin he’s been living in for 30 years, when asked what he’d be doing for Christmas. *And a heavenly voice declares, ‘this is the place where I can build my house on earth.’*

“I think she’ll like it a lot,” says the five-year-old boy standing next to me about the gift he’d chosen for his mom. It was a box of six bottles of orange-scented lotion and soap, shampoo and bubble-bath. He’d picked it from a long table of gifts at the Select-A-Gift program a week ago in the middle-school gymnasium. As we stood waiting together to have the gifts wrapped he shined with delight and could barely hold on to the armful of boxes he’d picked for his mother and father. *And a heavenly voice declares, ‘this is the place where I can build my house on earth.’*

How might we as a community live together differently – in the midst of both our celebration and waiting; our preparation and our rejoicing – if we envisioned ourselves to be, like Mary, pregnant with the divine Christ Child? What might happen if each one of us individually began noticing the divine being born within us? What might happen if we as a community grew in awareness that as one worshipping body, the Living God is forming, growing, being revealed at the heart of our community? Coming into our ordinary lives... Being born into our ordinary community...

As in the story of the two brothers that both thought they were blessed, often the work of preparation and celebration go hand-in-hand. Those times when we think we are preparing, we look back and realize it was also a time of rejoicing. Those times when we think we are celebrating, we look back and realize it was also a time of waiting.

But the good news today and always is that...

Whether we are preparing or rejoicing...

Whether we are grieving or celebrating new life...

Whether we are with extended family or alone for Christmas...

Whether we are waiting for medical test results to come back or if we are discerning how to go on when the results we receive are not what we expected...

Whether we have the entire next week off to celebrate Christmas or we must work on Christmas Day...

Whether our hearts are filled with doubt or belief, rejoicing or sadness, peace or chaos...

...no matter what, God is like a child in the womb of our community. Always with us... and always depending on the ordinary or rejected people to be God's hands... Always depending on the ordinary moments or even the painful times we would rather leave out of our family stories, depending on these moments, times, and stories *to be the sacred moments, the sacred times, the sacred stories* when we realize God is already at the heart of our family...

Can you feel the Christ Child kicking in the womb of this community? Have you noticed the Christ Child being born in your individual lives? Can we join with Mary and proclaim as a worshipping community, "Our soul magnifies the Lord..."? Can we give thanks for this final day of Advent preparation as well as this first day of Christmas celebration – this hinge in our life together as a worshipping community? Might we rejoice with Mary for the God our Savior who comes first as a vulnerable child yet in a womb? Amen.