

This message was prepared by Rev. Pamela Graf Short for the People of Prayer of the Tontogany Presbyterian Church for the fourth Sunday of Advent in the year of our LORD two thousand and eighteen. It is based chiefly on the lectionary texts in the Gospel of Luke. Here are all the lectionary passages for the day:

Micah 5:2-5a

5:2 But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

5:3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel.

5:4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth;

5:5 and he shall be the one of peace.

Psalm 80:1-7

80:1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth

80:2 before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!

80:3 Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

80:4 O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

80:5 You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure.

80:6 You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.

80:7 Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Hebrews 10:5-10

10:5 Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me;

10:6 in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.

10:7 Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me)."

10:8 When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law),

10:9 then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second.

10:10 And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

1:39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,

1:40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

1:41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit

1:42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

1:43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?

1:44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.

1:45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

1:46 And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,

1:47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

1:48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

1:49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

1:50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

1:51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

1:52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

1:53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

1:54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

1:55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Our Bible story for today includes spaces filled with joy and leaping and blessing and life. Mystery is paired with the common, as humans find themselves caught up in the swirl of God's movement.

It is a noisy passage that seems to insist that we hear its message.

There are five characters in the story.

Three of the characters are known as birthing ones: Elizabeth, Mary and the Holy Spirit.

One of the babes within the womb remains still,

while the other jumps and the rest of the players communicate with shouting and blessing and naming.

Yes, there is a lot going on in this little story,

not the least of which is Elizabeth,

a woman being filled with the Holy Spirit.

She proclaims that her relationship with Mary is now overwhelmingly changed.

No longer is Mary simply a younger cousin running through the hill country like Julie Andrews in the Sound of Music.

No.

Mary has taken on a role for which all generations heretofore shall call her blessed.

She is now named "Mother of my LORD".

While Protestants are a forgetful lot,

Catholics and the Greek Orthodox set a place for Mary that is second only to the Trinity.

"Theotokos" they call her: "Birth-giver-of-God.

Elizabeth calls her unborn child as a witness to this claim.

She is quite certain that her babe leaped for joy because the child recognized Mary's child as LORD, as Yahweh, as Emmanuel, as God with us.

So this is what I have been thinking about:

I have been thinking about coming close to Jesus;

meeting Jesus for the first time.

What would that be like?

Perhaps some of you have known Jesus for so long, you have no memory of meeting Jesus.

Perhaps others have never really met Jesus.

After all, it is one thing to know about someone,

and an entirely different thing to know someone.

It is one thing to hear of the birth of a babe.

It is another thing altogether to hold the baby in your arms.

It is one thing to hear of Jesus bringing sight to the blind,

it is another thing altogether to be the one to whom Jesus reveals colors and shapes and the sunrise of a new day.

It is one thing to hear that Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazerus.

It is another thing all together to wipe those tears away.

There is a gospel song that talks about seeing Jesus in glory:

It will be worth it all when we see Jesus!

Life's trials will seem so small when we see Christ.

One glimpse of his dear face, all sorrow will erase.

So, bravely run the race till we see Christ. (by Esther Kerr Rusthoi, 1979)

I have always rather liked this song.

One glimpse of his dear face...

But in today's story it is not about a glimpse of the face, but a startling movement of the Spirit of Christ.

Like us today,

John the unborn babe, did not see Jesus' face,

yet his spirit met Jesus' Spirit

and he knew within his whole being that he had just met God.

His response involves his whole body.

The text does not say "he kicked"

or "he moved his little fist".

It says "He leaped."

Whether it is the measured and planned leap of a trained dancer such as Lila,
or the spontaneous leap of a child's glee on Christmas morning,
leaping involves our whole selves
and at its best,
it comes from somewhere deep inside of us.

While it is entirely possible to leap alone,
in today's story,
leaping becomes a communal event.
Yes, John does the leaping,
but Elizabeth feels it and shares it and Mary responds by singing a song of blessed fulfillment.
Blessed fulfillment.
Because John leaps the other characters in this story are convinced that the hopes,
the longings,
the promises that their ancestors
waited and waited and waited for,
are now fulfilled.

We may want to argue with that.
When we look at our world,
we may want to shout a different conclusion:
After all, the pockets of the rich are still full
and the stomachs of the hungry remain empty.

Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way:
*"joy seems almost irreverent in a world where so much is going wrong.
Who can be joyful while babies starve and teenagers shoot each other and whole tribes of people try to wipe
each other off the face of the earth?
It's hard to get jump-up-and-down joyful about any of that.
Only joy has never had very much to do with what is going on in the world at the time.
That is what makes it different from happiness, or pleasure, or fun.
All of those depend on positive conditions—
good health, good job, happy family, lots of toys.
The only condition for joy is the presence of God.
Joy happens when God is present and people know it, which means that it can erupt in a depressed economy, in
the middle of a war,
in an intensive care waiting room...."*

When God is present with us
Joy can erupt in downtown Tontogany's empty storefronts.
When God is present with us
Joy can leap in Otsego's hallways.
When God is present with us
Joy can move the whole of our Presbytery to be a place of welcome and blessing.

When God is present with you
Joy can skip and hop and startle you into remembering that you are first and foremost a beloved child of God.
You are not defined by
the scorn of your neighbors
or the mocking of your enemies
or the craziness of your family
or the labels of your culture.

You are distinguished by the truth that Christ came to touch your spirit;
Christ came to bring you life
Life that makes you leap with the Spirit,
dance with the saints
and sing with the angels.
Let your soul magnify the LORD.
Let your spirit rejoice in God your Savior.
For God looks on you with delightful favor,
merciful remembrance,
and blessed fulfillment.

Now may the Mighty One who had done great things for you
Shine upon you in grace
Light your hearts with promises fulfilled
And leap in your spirit with
beauty, strength, honor and joy
Now and forevermore.