

**Advent 4 Year C, Luke 1:39-55**  
**Good Shepherd and St. John's, Milford, PA**  
**The Rev. Canon Elizabeth Geitz**  
**December 20, 2009**

“To be pregnant is one thing. To be pregnant with the Christ is something altogether different.” (Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, 118)

I can only imagine how confused and afraid Mary must have been following her angelic visitation. How can she possibly be with child? Who will believe her version of events? Her parents? Unlikely. Her friends? Doubtful. Her rabbi? No way!

Mary desperately needs someone to talk to, someone who knows first-hand what it means to answer “yes” to God’s desire for her life, regardless of how unexpected and strange it might seem. And then she remembers her relative, Elizabeth, unable to conceive for years, now pregnant with the child who is to become John the Baptist. But suppose Elizabeth doesn’t believe her? It’s a chance Mary decides she has to take.

So, our gospel reading this morning tells us that Mary leaves “with haste” to go to the hill country. There is a great deal of humanity revealed in these two words. Mary doesn’t wait around to hear the comments of her contemporaries. She doesn’t even try to explain to Joseph or to her parents. She knows what she needs to do, so she packs up and she leaves to visit a sister, another woman.

I have often wondered what that journey must have been like for Mary. Alone, wandering through the hilly countryside day and night, feeling confused and uncertain of what lay ahead. How can her life have changed so radically overnight? Who will believe her? Who will **ever** believe her?

One of my favorite paintings is of Mary and Elizabeth greeting one another and hugging, Elizabeth with her protruding belly and Mary

somewhat hopeful, but still uncertain of how she will be received, hugging Elizabeth as tightly as she can.

Then suddenly, Elizabeth says, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” Mary doesn’t even tell her she’s pregnant, much less the story she’s probably been rehearsing throughout her journey. Instead, Elizabeth miraculously intuits what the angel Gabriel has just told Mary, that the child in Mary’s womb will be the Son of God.

With these words from Elizabeth’s lips, Mary’s loneliness is over. Her anxiety is over. Her waiting is over.

But ours is still very much with us. On this fourth Sunday in Advent, we are on the edge of the event. We’re on the edge of the event that guarantees God’s presence in our humanity. We’re on the edge of the event that has the power to transform our lives forever, if only we will let it. But before this can happen, we must first be as open as Elizabeth was to seeing our Savior where we least expect to find him.

Our scripture passages today speak of the unexpectedness of God’s actions. In our reading from the book of Micah, the prophet points to Bethlehem as the source of the future for Israel. Bethlehem is well known to us now, but at the time it was like telling someone from New York City that the future of the world lay in Shohola, for Bethlehem was a tiny town that no one had ever heard of. In today’s world, it wouldn’t even have a traffic light – just like Shohola! Yet, this is where God chooses to be born.

Similarly, God chooses to be born not into one of the ruling families, but to an unwed peasant girl, prompting Mary to proclaim the words of one of the most beloved passages of scripture, now known as the Magnificat. Hear a portion of that passage again, “My spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant...He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.”

(Luke 1:47, 52)

So our Creator chooses the most unlikely person possible to call “Mother”. And by the grace of God, Elizabeth is able to perceive God’s presence in this most unlikely person. How ready to receive and how open to change she must have been! What a risk she was willing to take.

For being open to the presence of God always involves risk. Because truly receiving God into our hearts, not just outwardly worshipping our Creator, going through the motions of pious devotion, but to truly receive God we must be open to the possibility of transformation. For that is what the coming of Jesus is about - transformation.

A letting go of the former ways and an embracing of the new. A willingness to be open, rather than rigid; non-judgmental, rather than judgmental.

St. Paul tells us in his Letter to the Galatians that the fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, generosity, and self-control. When we truly let God into our lives and into our church, we can become centers of loving joyfulness. We can become nothing less than transformed.

Today, we are indeed on the edge. We are on the edge of the miracle of God’s presence bonded to humanity for all time. If we can accept that gift, and the challenges it brings. . . .If we can let go of the known and the comfortable . . . .If we can trust each other and God enough . . . . then Christmas really will happen. Not on some superficial level, but deep down in our gut, in the very depths of our soul.

One of my favorite books is *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison. It takes place in rural Ohio several years after the Civil War and tells the story of Seth, a young woman who has escaped slavery but is haunted by its heritage. Baffled by feelings of confusion and turmoil that nearly overtake her following freedom, she seeks the counsel of an older, wiser woman who says to her, “Seth, it’s gonna hurt now. Anything dead coming back to life hurts.”(p. 35)

If there's a place inside us that we've closed off, allowing no one in, not even God, and suddenly we open it up to God's transforming love, it can hurt, because letting go of the old and familiar can be painful.

It's fear of the growing pains involved in death surrendering itself to life that can keep us from seeing Christ where he is and allowing Christ's transforming presence to enter our souls. It's fear of the growing pains involved in the transformation of the institutional church that keeps some clinging to that which is familiar, even though it may not be good and may in fact be hurtful. Letting the spirit of Christ enter our hearts and souls is risky. It involves letting go and above all it requires trust.

On this last Sunday in Advent we do stand on the edge, just waiting to see what will happen. Waiting to see if this time, we will let the spirit of God infuse and transform the very depths of our being.

Yes, Mary is pregnant with the Christ, and in a way . . . so are you, and so am I.

Amen.