

“Good News”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
December 23rd, 2012
1st Sunday in Advent

Micah 5:2-5a

Luke 1:39-55

‘Mary said:

*“With all my heart I praise the Lord, and I am glad because of God my Savior.
He cares for me, his humble servant.*

From now on, all people will say God has blessed me.’ ”

Luke 1:46-48

Let us pray... O God,

Your plan for human salvation is a history woven together

with stories about the least likely people asked to help make it happen.

Bless and protect such people, we pray,

that they may yet be the hope for us all to make this a better world.

Amen

One of the side effects of any holiday season is the blues –

and this year, even Santa Claus is having a hard time.

I read on the internet that he had been brought up on charges by the ACLU

for infringement of civil liberties including

limiting freedom of expression, threatening speech, and invasion of privacy.

Among the documents that were submitted as evidence,

included a memo that said:

You better watch out. You better not cry.

You better not pout. I’m telling you why.

Santa Claus is coming to town.

He sees you when you are sleeping. He knows when you're awake.

He knows when you've been bad or good.

So be good for goodness' sake.

Santa’s lawyer is confident his client will beat the lawsuit if it goes to trial,

but the situation is complicated by the fact that Mr. Claus

is not a resident of the US – or any country for that matter.

Mr. Claus is free on bail, but his whereabouts are unknown at the moment,

though it is believed he is hiding in northern Canada.

<http://www.kraftmstr.com/christmas/humor/sue.html>

Certainly, not everyone experiences the blues,

but when someone becomes depressed around Christmas-time,

many causes are predictably linked to *stress*.

Willard, p.2

There is stress in preparing for guests to visit – or for making a visit yourself,
stress in getting all your shopping done, stress in preparing meals,
stress about family issues, lack of proper rest,
too much going on or too little, being with too many people
or not having enough time to be with some people.

The biggest problem, though, is connected to them all –
great expectations, the kind that can't be met
and the sense of powerlessness that follows them.

Anticipation is a good thing – the spice of life is having something
to look forward to – especially on holidays.

But taken to excess, anticipation –
in the form of unreasonably high expectations like perfection,
can lead to a nasty emotional hangover and missing out
on what is really important... the message and gifts God sends each day
regardless of our circumstances.

I had been looking forward to seeing a new movie called, “The Hobbit” –
and I saw it when it came out last week.

I am not going to encourage you one way or the other to see it yourself,
or say whether my expectations were met,

but let me just say this much about its theme –

it is a story about how even a little guy can make a big difference.

A ‘hobbit’ is a fictional character from the imagination of author, JRR Tolkien –
such that hobbits are a race of human-like beings,

who are somewhat taller than garden gnomes, but with hairy feet.

A certain hobbit was living a quiet, respectable life in a country village

when a wizard showed up one day to invite him along

on an adventurous journey.

And in some ways, that is like our gospel lesson today...

Actually, the gospel is even more fantastic –

instead of a wizard, an angel of God shows up one day

to announce to a young peasant girl named Mary

that she is invited to help the Lord God, Creator of the Universe

in an amazing way – by giving birth to the Savior of the world.

The angel also tells Mary that her Aunt Elizabeth is pregnant

which was good news to Mary

because Elizabeth had been unable to have a baby

and was well beyond child-bearing years.

So, she accepts this mission to become the human mother for ‘the Son of God’,
and sets off on a journey to visit her Aunt Elizabeth in the south.

Willard, p.3

By the time Mary arrived, Elizabeth's pregnancy had begun to show
and at the moment of their meeting,

Elizabeth felt her baby kick inside her womb
and she took it for a sign of God's blessing.

For Elizabeth's baby would grow up to be like the prophets of old,
John the Baptist himself.

So, Mary had someone to share her good news with –
a wise woman who would also serve as her mentor.

Then, Mary recites a spontaneous poem – traditionally called 'The Magnificat',
which may even have been a song, celebrating and praising God.

The New Revised Standard Version puts it like this:

And Mary said,

*'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.*

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

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

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

This first part reads like a declaration of independence,
but what follows is an emancipation proclamation...

[God] has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

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

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

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

In our Bible Study at Steeplechase this week,

we studied this particular gospel text of the Magnificat.

And some of the discoveries we made from that text came from
asking what this told us about Mary herself.

In the first section, Mary acknowledges her humility – her powerlessness
before God, but also God's greatness as one who cares for
and empowers those who are humble to do great things.

The rest of her love-song is about the attributes and deeds of God
which shares similar phrases with the ancient prayer of Hannah
who gave thanks to God for the birth of her son, Samuel,
one of the greatest of Israel's prophets.

Willard, p.4

This suggests that Mary was aware of Biblical traditions –
which would have been exceptional for a woman in that era.
Not only does she demonstrate knowledge about the Bible,
but that she had reflected about it and
discovered how God favored those who are poor and marginalized –
‘the least of these’ as Jesus would say.
Mary says nothing specifically about having a baby –
except what that baby already represents and no doubt would accomplish.
In Mary’s Magnificat we see the seeds and the blossoming
of both personal salvation and social liberation.

Mary speaks of these things as having already come to pass –
yet her words are also a preview for what will happen
through Jesus Christ, her son.
It’s as if this is already accomplished with her pregnancy –
and that Mary has no doubt that her baby will be born.

These great expectations are echoed in the words of the Prophet Micah:
*Like a shepherd taking care of his sheep,
this ruler will lead and care for his people by the power
and glorious name of the Lord his God.
His people will live securely,
and the whole earth will know his true greatness,
because he will bring peace.*

This is the character of God and of Christ the Son of God
for what has been done and what will yet be done.
There have been people throughout history who have continued
to pass on this legacy of liberation to succeeding generations,
as they have been inspired by the Spirit of God
even though they themselves seemed small and powerless.
One of the greatest examples in our time has been Mother Teresa
the diminutive Roman Catholic nun of Calcutta, India.

She was 40 years old with some knowledge of first aid and 9 rupees in her pocket
when she entered the slums of Calcutta to begin her mission
with the poor people there.
Initially, she provided basic medical help,
but her work took a turn that has continued to have a world-wide impact
when she began her ministry to people who were dying.

Willard, p.5

This came about when she found a man in the street
near death and wretched with maggots in his sores.

She took him to a hospital, but they refused to admit him.

So, she brought the man to a second hospital, and was refused again.

Finally, she said she wasn't leaving until someone helped take care of this person –
then, he was admitted and she began the work for which she had become
recognized and celebrated throughout the world.

Over time, people from the community that Mother Teresa served,
were attracted to help and some of them sought to become
a Christian like her.

What she sought to do was simply make sure that a dying person
knew they were loved and cared for before they left this world.

She would treat the person who came to her as if they were
the only one who mattered in the whole world –
as if he or she were Christ himself,
even in a 'distressing disguise' of disease and deformity.

Yet, Mother Teresa herself admitted to suffering from doubt –
what is sometimes called 'the dark night of the soul'.

Her atheistic critics took that information as proof for their arguments,
but Mother Teresa's perseverance to do what is loving despite her doubts
is a model to be followed by any of us –
especially, when others' hope and joy depend on us.

Impossibly great expectations and a poor self-image can get in the way of
God's intention for us to be great.

The blues may blind us as a result,
unless we are willing to see passed our limitations
and persevere until joy shows up to surprise us.

So, the least and unlikely ones who don't expect a lot to begin with,
like Mother Teresa, Elizabeth, and Mary – even the Hobbit,
wind up becoming the greatest help.

Willard, p.6

Steve Burt, a UCC minister and storyteller,

tells this story about a department store Santa Claus

who listens to children's wishes and gives them a gift.

He is an older man with his own beard, gray gone mostly to white
with the requisite belly like a bowl full of jelly.

Then, a little girl climbs up onto his knee to tell him her wish –
and that she is blind.

She asks permission to touch his face and pull on his beard
to see if it was real – and it was.

She laughs and says,

'Oh, Santa. You look just like I knew you would. You're perfect, just perfect!'

At the end of the day, his grandson shows up to take him home –
and helps him into his wheelchair.

He asks his grandfather how the day went and the older man replies,
'Perfect, just perfect.'

So, keep your great expectations for "perfection" modest
in what you expect of Christmas and yourself
and don't miss the great things you have –
which is already enough.

Amen

Micah 5:2-5a

2 Bethlehem Ephrath,

you are one of the smallest towns in the nation of Judah.

But the Lord will choose one of your people to rule the nation—
someone whose family goes back to ancient times.

3 The Lord will abandon Israel only until this ruler is born,
and the rest of his family returns to Israel.

4 Like a shepherd taking care of his sheep,
this ruler will lead and care for his people by the power
and glorious name of the Lord his God.

His people will live securely, and the whole earth will know his true greatness,
5 because he will bring peace.

Luke 1:39-55

39 A short time later

Mary hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea.

40 She went into Zechariah's home, where she greeted Elizabeth.

41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, her baby moved within her.

The Holy Spirit came upon Elizabeth.

42 Then in a loud voice she said to Mary:

God has blessed you more than any other woman!

He has also blessed the child you will have.

43 Why should the mother of my Lord come to me?

44 As soon as I heard your greeting,

my baby became happy and moved within me.

45 The Lord has blessed you because you believed
that he will keep his promise.

46 Mary said:

With all my heart I praise the Lord,

47 and I am glad because of God my Savior.

48 He cares for me, his humble servant.

From now on, all people will say God has blessed me.

49 God All-Powerful has done great things for me, and his name is holy.

50 He always shows mercy to everyone who worships him.

51 The Lord has used his powerful arm to scatter those who are proud.

52 He drags strong rulers from their thrones

and puts humble people in places of power.

53 God gives the hungry good things to eat,
and sends the rich away with nothing.

54 He helps his servant Israel and is always merciful to his people.

55 The Lord made this promise to our ancestors,
to Abraham and his family forever!