

Advent IV December 20, 2009

It's always a bit odd to be preaching an Advent sermon just a few days before Christmas; but the Gospel helps—it brings Christmas very near—and we begin this week as we will end it, paying attention to Mary and the birth. But there's still a word of Advent for us before we sprint through the last lap to Christmas.

We find that word in the Visitation. This story of Mary and Elizabeth is a story of hope and of joy—of ancient longings for redemption and security finally fulfilled; of a future that can be faced with confidence and with excitement. Those two impossibly pregnant women—the barren wife of an aging priest, and an unknown virgin with neither royal blood nor an important family—began a song of praise that has continued through twenty centuries: “My soul magnifies the Lord,” Mary sings, “and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Wonderful words—there's no better Christmas music.

And both the world out there and our own souls desperately need this pure word of joy and of hope. For in the midst of all the Christmas spirit around us, we know, as I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, that December can be an especially difficult time, and an especially empty time. I've seen that, and felt that, a lot this month.

But that shouldn't be surprising. Listen: secular holidays—cultural joy—will always fall short. They *always* have to be tinsel, or painted with gaudy colors, in order to look solid and impressive. That's because when the world looks to itself alone for fulfillment, when the world tries to find within itself alone cause for celebration and cause for joy, it simply can't. Ultimately, the world can find only emptiness—an emptiness it frantically tries to fill by tossing every possible variety of stuff, of things into itself.

So the culture doesn't commercializes holidays because the culture intentionally seeks second best. Instead, the culture commercializes holidays because that's simply the best the culture can do.

The same thing is true with each of us. If we look only or primarily to ourselves, only or primarily to who we are, or to what we can do, or to what we can get—if we look only or primarily there for fulfillment, for hope and for joy—then we are doomed to mouths-full of ashes. There really isn't any ultimate, deep and lasting good news in the world all by itself, or in ourselves alone.

It's to all of this that the joy and hope of Mary and Elizabeth speak most loudly. For their joy is aimed directly at the world's pain—at our pain. Both women rejoice, both sing—yet neither celebrates anything of her own doing. Neither sings because of what *she* has accomplished, or because of what she deserves, or because of what the world is doing for her, or because it's the time of year people are suppose to sing.

Mary and Elizabeth sing because they have been given a new life to share. Each sings because that which nature and the world have named as barren is suddenly filled with life—life that will, in its own time, shake the foundations of a world that has absolutely no idea what's going on.

These two women rejoice, and we are called to rejoice with them, for one reason and one reason only: because God loves us enough to act. Their joy, and ours, is deeply rooted and real. Their song, and ours, is sung only because God loves us enough to come to us—to the most barren, the most unnoticed, the very least of us—and to plant in us, and in our world, God's own life, God's own hope, and God's own promises of peace. Our hope is in the name of the Lord.

And that never seems to happen where or how or when we expect it to. Look at the other lessons: the prophet Micah told an Israel in deep trouble to look to a small and insignificant town if it wanted hope—because nothing too important was coming out of Jerusalem, or Babylon, or any big city or important place. The writer of Hebrews insists that the sacrifice that mattered was not any of the beautiful rituals on the High Altar or in the Holy of Holies in the Temple; instead, the sacrifice that mattered was a grubby little execution on a garbage dump outside of town.

And for all the beautiful paintings and other art that have been inspired by that scene of Mary's Visitation to Elizabeth, one thing is certain—at the time, nobody noticed, nobody cared. || As a rule, it is not the loud noises that carry the Word of God.

Still, what God wants to do to us, to each of us, this Christmas, is exactly what he did for Mary and Elizabeth. God wants to put into our hearts, and into our lives, hope and joy. Real hope—the kind that isn't for sale and doesn't wear out; and real joy—the joy that begins deep inside. And God wants each of us, like Mary, to bear within us, and to carry to those around us, no one other than the Lord of life. That's what God wants.

For that gift to be given to Mary, and to Elizabeth, they didn't have to go shopping. Instead they had to be still and quiet. They had to listen to voices that no one else could hear; voices that said impossible things. Each had to believe that God would do what God promised, even to her—even to the person she was. And each had to trust that, somehow, the Lord would be faithful.

I think it requires a special vision, and a special discipline, to see signs of hope, to discover such deep cause for joy, in our world and in our lives. It takes eyes that trust and hearts that believe to find real reasons to sing, to magnify the Lord, to give thanks. But it can be done, it must be done, if we are to discover what this season is really all about.

Perhaps what Mary and Elizabeth have to say to our Christmas season is that the hope and joy which the world outside is trying to concoct, or to pretend, or to buy, this month, is really a gift—a gift usually given quietly in the places we least expect it, in ways we do not believe possible.

For the real business of our deepest preparations for Christmas is still waiting, and listening, and trusting that the Lord will regard the low estate of his servants; and that he will give to us what the world cannot give and cannot recognize. And perhaps, as happened to Mary and Elizabeth, some new life will begin to grow within us, new life that can transform us, and renew our world.