

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Advent 4

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Two women of a lowly background. Two women who had no social or religious clout. Two women who were probably on the margins of society. Two women who were not part of the religious establishment. They were two women who were either dealing with the shame of bareness or the shame of being pregnant out of wedlock-two ostracized women. The stories of these two women are similar in so many ways, and yet different. Different in that although Elizabeth was the older woman who had been looking forward to being pregnant, Mary on the other hand is a young maiden who was unexpectedly pregnant.

For Elizabeth, her miraculous pregnancy had taken away her shame-for in a traditional society where bareness was considered to be the result of a punishment, Elizabeth can now celebrate with Mary because God has reversed the shame of bareness, and had put a new song in her mouth. Elizabeth stands among a unique tradition of women-Sarah (the mother of Isaac) and Hannah (the mother of Samuel). Like Elizabeth, these two women were old and had passed the stage where they could give birth. All throughout their adult life, they had to endure the shame that came with bareness.

A common thread which runs through the stories of Sarah, Hannah and Elizabeth was one where they could look at themselves with unbridled pity and disdain, their situation was one where they could dive into themselves and cry out in deep anguish over their inability to be pregnant and bear children of their own.

Why me? They would ask. But deep within their anguish was also a place of hope and strength, a wellspring of renewal which made it possible for each of them to at least skeptically embrace the good news of their impending pregnancies.

Sarah, Hannah and Elizabeth reveal to us the value of God's promises, they also help us to understand the virtue of the patience with which we await their fulfillment. In fulfilling God's promises, nothing stands in the way of God, not even the complicated nature of human physiology or the complicated nature of creation; nothing stands in God's way. What often stands in the way, is ourselves. When we refuse God's invitation, we stand in the way of God.

As a young maiden, Mary had the opportunity to refuse God's invitation when God reached out to her with the good news of being the bearer of God. Mary in a confused state of mind, wonders how this can be possible. But the difficulty in grasping this request was not in itself sufficient to have her refuse the invitation. Mary's simple response, "be it done unto me according to your word" only reinforces the desire not to stand in God's way but to open up herself to any and all possibilities which God had in mind.

And so with the joy of her pregnancy, Mary walks the rugged hills to visit her cousin Elizabeth. Not knowing that Mary was pregnant, nor the circumstances surrounding Mary's pregnancy, Elizabeth beams with joy, as she welcomes her cousin Mary into her home.

Upon greeting Mary on her arrival, an incredible feeling of joy, wonder and amazement leads Elizabeth to recognize and validate for the first time, Mary's private self-sacrifice of being the bearer of God. Elizabeth in her pronouncement affirm the idea that God had already begun the process of overturning the structures which have long ago been promised by the prophets.

Here in Elizabeth's house, we have two women whom God had chosen to begin the process of human transformation, not through violent confrontation but by a heart full of tenderness willing to open itself up to any and all possibilities that God may have in mind.

The idea of human transformation became necessary because of human corruption. Not only had we gotten off track, but humans who shared the same nature with the Word could not fulfill the very purpose for which humans were created. Sacrifices and offerings became a substitute to being in a right relationship with God. And so the question was, would God allow the creatures whom He had created reasonable, and who were in fact perishing, be allowed to continue heading down the path of ruin and non-existence?

For God then to have accepted the premise of eventual human non-existence would mean that God Himself was not as invested in what God had created in the beginning. But the God who created out of nothing was as much invested in His creation, and so He chose, out of pure unconditional love, to enter the world in a new way. He chose to recreate the world He had made through self-sacrifice, by sacrificing God's own dignity and stooping to our level.

Henri Nouwen beautifully expresses this thought this way "God's immeasurable love for us is expressed in this holy interchange. God so much desired to fulfill our deepest yearning for a home that God decided to build a home in us. Thus we can remain fully human and still have our home in God. In this new home the distinction between distance and closeness no longer exists. God, who is furthest away, came closest, by taking on our mortal humanity. Thus God overcomes all distinctions between "distant" and "close" and offers us an intimacy in which we can be most ourselves when most like God."ⁱ

As a result of this holy interchange, the letter to the Hebrews argues that, there's been a shift in what God desires of us. No longer does God require of us sacrifices and offerings of animals and their blood, but a body which is soaked so deep in self-sacrifice that it is primed to do the will of God because that body has found a home in the God who first found a home among humans.

The reality is, creation did not come about through the agency of a human being, it came about through the agency of the Word. And the new creation which God seek to inaugurate will also come about through the same Word. The Word is without a body and to have assumed a body other than our bodies would have made our salvation impossible. If creation is to be renewed then the Word must be in the same form as those it seeks to renew. And so the Word first took our human form in Mary, welcomed and affirmed by Elizabeth as he found a home among humans.

Elizabeth's welcome and affirmation was more than enough for Mary, who bursts into a triumphant song which was not only similar to the Song of Hannah, but which confirms God as a keeper of promises. Though the promises may last more than a lifetime, yet, God out of His mercies remembers and keeps His word.

The joy of Advent is one of praise, praise to the God who keeps His word, praise to the God who looks also to the lowly, praise to the God who is merciful, praise to the God who remembers us. Praise to the God who fills us with God things. Praise to the God who helps us. May we never cease to sing like Mary. Amen.

ⁱ Nouwen, Henri J.M. *Lifesigns-Intimacy, Fecundity and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective* (Crown Religion Business Forum, 1989)