

“A Young Woman’s Revolution”

Rev. David Gregory

December 23, 2018

Fourth Sunday of Advent



Visitation by James Tissot

First reading

Micah 5:2-5 New Revised Standard Version

*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.*

*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.*

*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;
and he shall be the one of peace.*

Second reading

Luke 1:39-55 New Revised Standard Version

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has looked with favor 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. He 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 forever."

A funny thing happened to me on the way to Christmas; I fell in love with Advent instead. And now I'm left on this fourth Sunday, feeling like I don't want it to end. Perhaps it was that amazing, beautiful, ethereal experience of the solstice labyrinth walk that made me feel like Peter, James, or John on the mount of Transfiguration when they told Jesus they wanted to just park there for a while. Fortunately or unfortunately, depending on your viewpoint, we're here to tell a story. And the story continues and we need to continue with it.

About a month ago I stood on this spot and invited you on a journey that I said would begin with Advent and take us through the coming year. For a reminder of what I meant by that, I'm going to do something I've never done. I'm going to quote myself from my message on November 25th.

Just who is this person we call "Jesus?" I'd like to propose that we find out. Next week as we begin to tell the story again for the millionth time, let's tell it in a new way. Let's figure out a way to get the story of this Jesus into the consciousness of those around us, perhaps even into our own consciousness for the first time.

Instead of Christianity being the only tradition we're afraid of, why not boldly state the terms under which we are willing to be referred to (as Christians)?

The times in which we are living require that we be grounded in spiritual practice, that we speak clearly, stand firmly, love generously and welcome extravagantly. We have to have a firm grasp of who we are, and the ability to reach across all lines and demographics to express ourselves within the human race. We need to honor and embrace the enlightened teachings that pull us ever forward.

So to advance this story on the fourth Sunday of Advent, I made a choice to do what seemed very normal on the East Coast, but feels a little radical on the West Coast. I chose two readings from the Revised Common Lectionary, meaning that we're looking at a couple of scripture readings that are being considered in the overwhelming majority of Protestant denominations on this very Sunday. For perhaps the only time all year, we're going to wear what all of the other kids are wearing. I did this to give myself a location on the road map, and also to give myself an exercise. If I am going to introduce this person we call Jesus to the Community Congregational Church. What better time to do it than Christmas?

In this week's readings, we hear the words of the Hebrew prophet Micah, who longed for the peace and security of Israel, but lived through the Assyrian invasion. A century later, the Jews would be conquered again by Babylon, then over the next seven hundred years they would be dominated by Medo-Persia, Greece, and finally by Rome. Why is this important? Well, if we are to understand the origin and meaning of the infancy narrative—what we affectionately call the “Christmas Story”—then we ought to have a sense of where it came from. The short answer is that it came from a sense of longing and despair. In our modern and postmodern celebrations, the narratives have become a little schmaltzy and sentimental—the Gospel of Luke presented in the voice of Linus. What we have to realize is that these words were written decades after the Crucifixion. The structures and places described in all the stories of Jesus’s life were largely destroyed. The Romans came through and leveled Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. It’s a lot like someone sitting atop the rubble of the World Trade Center and writing a hope-filled story to try to make sense of the senseless.

The journey of Mary on a donkey accompanied by Joseph, the child’s birth in a stable surrounded by animals, shepherds and angels, with the Wise Men appearing shortly afterward—this is the picture we describe as the truth of the Gospel. Two of the Gospels say nothing about Jesus’s birth. Mark, which is the earliest, does not have a word about it. The gospel of John is silent about it. The two Gospels that do mention the nativity differ on some significant details. Matthew describes Mary and Joseph as living in Bethlehem, fleeing to Egypt and then moving to Nazareth. Luke, on the other hand, has the two originally living in Nazareth, traveling to Bethlehem in time for the birth and then returning home. If we’re talking about inconsistency, this is the tip of the iceberg. None of this probably happened at this time of year, either. (Let us always remember the fourth Sunday of Advent as the day when David spoiled Christmas forever.)

We could talk about this until Easter and still not sift through all of it, and the deeper we go into the details the worse it gets, that is, as long as we are trying to make the Gospels be linear histories. They aren’t; they are merely portraits. If our goal is to make some determination about what really happened, we have no way of knowing. If our goal is to find spiritual nourishment in these beautiful portraits of Jesus, then we will have enough to feast upon for our entire lives. If we want to feel our way through the layers of meaning and harvest some insights—some new ones this year, some different ones next time around, and around, and around—we will have found the true riches of this thing we call Christianity.

For today, I am stunned by the way in which Mary’s world devalued, at its own peril, the feminine voice, and the way in which the church suppressed it century after century, destroying the portraits created by women, except for this one voice, given to a young woman with child, who in the home of her cousin Elizabeth, without Joseph’s voice anywhere around, and Elizabeth’s husband robbed of his ability to speak (think of it—this household where all male voices are miraculously silent!), Mary has her say. And let me tell you, she sings it all out. This is the song of a revolutionary young woman, a song about pulling down all of the corrupt powers around her, about finding a world where justice and peace are valued over control and domination. She sings about a world where no one is hungry or needy, where there is equity and equality. And yes, it is written in the language that is two thousand years old, but the revolutionary spirit is indelible, as indelible as the voices of young women about to join Congress, the voices of protesters across

this country, or the voice of a Supreme Court Justice who needs to heal from surgery so she can go back to lifting weights.

When we tell the old stories tomorrow evening, we're going to look beyond the gender-exclusive language, we're going to look past the themes of lordship, of slave and master. With all the joy of a young woman having given birth to her firstborn, we are going to look into the eyes of an infant, tender and mild, and see the hope that she sees, that this mess we've gotten ourselves into is only for a time, and then shall come peace on earth, good will toward all. With the coming of the Christ child, we say amen to that, Sister.



Adoration of the Baby
Gerrit van Honthorst