

Dec 20 2009  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent  
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St James Episcopal Church

I want to acknowledge my appreciation that you are here today.

I looked at the days of obligation list in another Christian denomination and found fifteen or so dates listed for the liturgical year. The 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent is not listed among them.

The celebrations at the end of this week are listed and we will have spectacular numbers of people coming to church this week.

That is not news to anyone who sits here now. We have made our jokes and had our chuckles about who shows up on the Vigil of the Nativity and the Celebration of the Nativity, also known as Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. We have less-than-complimentary titles for the people who attend services on Christmas Eve and Easter Day. In some circles they are labeled CE Christians, CE meaning Christmas-Easter. And there is another label, CEO Christians, Christmas, Easter and Other days, as required. Those other days are events like baptisms, weddings and funerals.

In defense of these people, I preach this sermon today.

We live in a world where the popular culture values being thin, beautiful, stylish, young, connected, rich and temporary. Literally millions will go on diets the week after next, trying to get thin, or become thinner or get back into thin. People will be dressed, coiffed, nipped and tucked into perfection. Popular culture pushes instant connections like Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and the like, and changing your look, your hair color, your relationships and your address are as simple as getting dressed in the morning.

I think these thoughts against the backdrop of today's Gospel lesson and the marvelous hymn of joy called the Magnificat, from the Latin for the opening words of this imbedded hymn, My soul magnifies the Lord.

So while the church is labeled as stodgy and out of touch with the real world, let us talk about who is in today's Gospel in real world terms.

Two women meet just outside of Jerusalem, cousins who are separated by many years and both are pregnant. One is the wife of a priest and the other woman is not married. The first thinks her birth is a miracle because she and her husband are too old to have kids, just like Abraham and Sarah. The second and younger woman thinks her baby is a miracle because she isn't married and an angel told her it was God's own child she was carrying. Sounds like 21<sup>st</sup> century news, an unwed mother and her cousin, the pastor's wife, are both pregnant. Elizabeth's husband is ecstatic and Joseph offers to separate from Mary, if that seems the right thing to do. Ecstatic proclamations are made including the centerpiece of today's gospel, Mary's Magnificat.

Two things, in particular, catch my attention.

First, this great New Testament hymn reads a whole lot like a Psalm, and why not, Mary was used to hearing psalms.

The second is the element of reversal. The proud are brought down, the powerful are toppled from their thrones, the rich lose everything. On the flip side, the folks who were nothing become something, those who are hungry are fed and there's nothing specific about what kind of hunger and what kind of food. The same God who has blessed this self-acclaimed lowly servant will show mercy on all of us. She will go from lowly handmaiden to a name in history. And this merciful God is the same God

who made the covenant with all of the tribes of Israel and sealed that covenant with a miraculous birth of a child to Sarah and Abraham.

But more subtle in this lesson is who is speaking and in what context. For a culture that was male-dominated, the story is about two women and their unborn children. For a country besieged by a conquering empire, there is hope in the wings. For a faith community waiting for a Messiah, a child is born and a new covenant is forged.

The great song of the Virgin Mary is there for all of us, the faithful on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent and for the CE/CEO folks in the coming days of celebration. God has reminded us that the lowliest are called to carry the newborn Jesus into the world again this year. God has reminded us that pride, power and wealth matter less than ministry to those who seem to be nothing and have nothing and are hungry and ready to be fed.

Advent is now over, the pregnant church is about to give birth to the savior within us. May we sing with the Blessed Virgin as we consider the good things God has given to us, "Our souls magnify the Lord and our spirits rejoice in God our Savior." Amen.