

ADVENT 4C 2024
Immanuel Highlands Episcopal Church
Wilmington, Delaware
December 22, 2024

Here we are, in the first full day of Winter. It will take a few weeks for us to notice that we have a minute or two of increasing daylight, as the sun made its annual U-turn in the wee hours of yesterday morning. We're just a few days away from the date that retailers have been warning us about for some two to three months, and, on this day, we hear a couple of familiar stories.

They are stories of promise. Micah's comforting words to those in Bethlehem are about their dodging the bullet when Assyrian forces attacked and destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel. The prophet's words come some two centuries before Nebuchadnezzar's army attacked Judah. Micah is an erstwhile contemporary of Amos and the first of the prophets named Isaiah.

Bethlehem is a small, insignificant area in the kingdom of Judah, now part of what we know as the West Bank. Its name translates as "house of bread." While its stature is small, its promise is huge. From it will come one who will reign over Israel, which will once again be a unified land and people after its division at the hands of sibling rivalry after the death of Solomon.

Fast forward to Luke's beautiful telling of those intimately involved in the year leading up to the birth of Jesus. Luke remembers the prophecy about Bethlehem, and weaves it into his story; he wants to show us that Jesus is the fulfillment of that long ago promise.

Like Bethlehem, Elizabeth and Mary are fairly insignificant characters in this story, except that something of great significance is about to occur through them. Elizabeth is past her child-bearing years, yet she is six months pregnant. Mary, her cousin, is a teenager, probably about thirteen years old, unwed, but expecting her own child.

Luke makes us privy to the interaction with a heavenly being who is involved in both women's lives. Gabriel appears to Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, as he enters the holiest part of the Temple to offer incense. Zechariah's disbelief of the angel causes him to become mute, which lasts until his son is born and he writes the name he is to be called, according to the prophecy from the angel. His song burst forth when his speech returns, and is one of Luke's wonderful canticles we continue to sing.

Mary has her own song, which Luke models after one attributed to Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel. We'll hear and sing Mary's song a few times today. It gives us the gist of what this day means.

Bethlehem. Elizabeth. Mary. They're not famous. They wouldn't even have "influencer" status at this point, if such a status even existed. In fact, if they tried to do

that, they would be shut down in a moment, because their words, their purpose, is the world's great reversal, set in motion by nothing less than the Spirit of God, which they might know something about, but without the doctrines developed by the later church.

And that's the point. God chooses the least likely of persons and places to accomplish what God sets out to do. God doesn't go for the glitzy celebrity status icons of the age. God doesn't usually choose the most athletic or the wealthiest, either, although, God being God, could do that and surprise us that way, too.

Luke's entire Gospel is about that reversal. Mary tells us. God has filled the hungry, exalted the meek, and thrown down the mighty from their self-important pedestals. God is fulfilling the promise made so long ago to Abraham, but opening the doors to millions yet to come to become children of God.

Imagine yourself being on the outside, hungry, cold, unsheltered. Then, a shaft of light begins to spread as a door is opened. Warm air rushes into the cold. A quiet, somewhat shy voice then says, "come in. There's room for you here."

Now imagine hearing your own voice saying those words to someone who might at first disbelieve that you mean them. When you can do that, you take on angel status, the word angel meaning "messenger." You are God's messenger, appearing to someone who might be surprised to know they exist in our own time outside a Hallmark card or movie.

When you can do that, you become like Luke, an evangelist, or teller of Good News. Your home, your place of worship, and your heart become like a house of bread fresh from the oven, just waiting for a nice slab of rich butter.

And when you can do that, you become like Mary and Hannah, Zechariah, Micah, Isaiah and so many more, with a song to sing that announces once again the greatest reversal of all time—death becomes new life. Its words invite the eternal into human life, offering transcendent mercy and grace to all those caught in life's winter chill, but who yearn to sing the song of God's eternal, life-warming love.