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Weekend of Sunday, December 23, 2018
4th Sunday of Advent/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year C
Primary Text:
Sermon Title: “Hope for God’s Love”

Theme

We are presented with Elizabeth, John’s mother, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, two women filled with the Holy Spirit and with faith. In Elizabeth’s inspired greeting and Mary’s song of praise we hear of a saving God who remembers, scatters, lifts up, and fulfills all things.

Text

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” [

⁴⁶And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

Sermon

So, we've made it! This is the second shortest possible Advent we can have, eclipsed only by last year when the 4th Sunday of Advent was also Christmas Eve. Do you remember that? That was a busy and long day.

I hope to see you all back again tomorrow night to celebrate Christmas Eve, and if you cannot make one of our three worship services then make one wherever you are going.

This Advent our theme has been God's Hope.

On the First Sunday of Advent the theme was the "Hope for God's Presence."

The theme for Second week of Advent was the "Hope for God's Peace."

And last week, the Third Week of Advent, the theme was "Hope for God's Joy."

Today, the theme is "Hope for God's Love."

I will develop this thought more on Christmas Eve when the theme is "Hope has Come" but throughout this series I have been thinking that all this stuff, God's Presence, Peace, Joy, as well as Love, can only be realized through faith.

Last Tuesday at the Council meeting, Flower Azary mentioned how much she enjoyed ringing the bell for the Salvation Army Red Kettle Campaign at the Cornersburg Sparkle Market, and then Michele Vargo chimed in saying that her family sang carols as they rang the bell and they loved it. Did Flower and the Vargo family "love" the volunteering? Did they "love" the opportunity to serve? Did they "love" being servants of the LORD?

Well, I can tell you this, if they didn't love it, there are less annoying things to do for an hour, and so yes, I am led to believe that *in faith* they loved their volunteerism.

This Sunday evening, several of us will dress up in nativity appropriate costumes and act out the Nativity for two hours and others will serve dinner to complete strangers. Do we do it because we love it? Speaking for all the others, I believe that *in faith* we really do love it, because in a very real way, we don't just tell the old old story, we dramatize it, so that people can visualize it. And it is our hope *in faith* that through our portrayal we reach people with the love of God.

Each beginning of Advent the Sharing Tree goes up and names are put on it and then you take a name off of it and shop so that less fortunate children in our community can know the joy of Christmas. Do those children get it that a gift from an anonymous giver is your way of sharing the love of God, and therefore bringing the love God to them? I doubt it, but I believe that *in faith* that you feel God's love when you shop for the gifts and give them away.

In these cases and many other Christmas traditions, Christians exemplify the love of God through the various activities we do – some known and some unknown. Thirty-seven years ago, the first Christmas Carol and I were married, we bought turkeys and a bag of groceries to finish a Christmas feast for five of the poorest families in the church we attended at that time. And then in the dark of night we put them on their porches and played ding-dong ditch. We had a great time, and though it was a long time ago, I'm going to say that *in faith*, we felt God's love in sharing with others.

At some point over the next week, we will gather with family and friends and share gifts. Sometimes the gifts are what is needed, and sometimes they are what was hoped for. But in all cases, they are gifts given because we believe *in faith* that God gave us the best gift of all in his own Son, Jesus Christ.

If we don't have faith that the reason we celebrate at all this time of year is because of the God's gift of love in Christ Jesus, then this is just another excuse to party with friends and family. And while partying with friends and family is not, in and of itself, a bad thing, the fact is that for over two thousand years, Christians have believed *in faith* that what we are celebrating is God's gift of love. And at least for a day or two, the world slows down and we wallow in the hope of God's love – whether all the world knows God's love or not.

Reminds me of the true story of the Christmas Truce of 1914. It was in the early months of WWI when on Christmas Eve, French, German, and British soldiers crossed trenches, calling out "Merry Christmas" in their enemies' native tongue. In some areas, men from both sides ventured into no man's land on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day to mingle and exchange food and souvenirs. There were joint burial ceremonies and prisoner swaps, and several meetings ended in carol-singing. Men played games of football with one another, giving one of the most memorable images of the truce.

Why would mortal enemies stop killing each other for 24 hours and demonstrate Christian love and respect? I'm going to say that it was faith in the love of God.

The First Reading for today is a prophecy from the LORD through the prophet Micah. In it the LORD foretold that his final answer for Presence, Peace, Joy, and Love would come through the no-account village of Bethlehem. "Bethlehem? Can anything good come out of Bethlehem?" many surely asked. But God's answer was, "Hope in faith, and I will do this thing."

In the Gospel Reading, delivered in unique fashion today, Mary visited her relative Elizabeth, and the minute

⁴¹Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Did you hear that? Elizabeth didn't give Mary that disappointed look, like "Mary, what have you done?" In faith, and maybe for the first time, Mary and Elizabeth both understood that God was doing something amazing, and they were blessed to be a part of it.

And Mary, full of the Spirit as well, broke into the song that we know of as the Magnificat, that we all sang together as the Gospel Reading. While another young woman might have been devastated by her "choosing," Mary felt the love of God not only for herself, but also for her people Israel, and not only for Israel, but for the whole of creation.

And isn't it wonderful that once a year we are reminded of it, and that we get to build up to it for four weeks (plus or minus), and then celebrate it like no other celebration. Mortal enemies stop killing each other and sing carols with each other – what else causes that?

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

So the theme for this weekend is “Hope for God’s Love” and while I have only just begun to list the countless examples that I and others have witnessed, God’s love, like God’s presence, peace, and joy, the theme for the first three weekends of Advent, can only be noticed, felt, in faith.

My Raisin' the Bar Challenge for you and yours this Christmas season is that you turn off the TV, and find your nativity set and take a good long look at it and into it. And meditate on the story and the characters, and be reminded that this is no fairy tale. This is the "Hope for God's Love" come down to earth. And while the Nativity of our Lord is a historical fact, it is only true when we acknowledge it to be true and live like we believe it in faith.

Prayer

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. With your abundant grace and might, free us from the sin that binds us, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen