

**Fourth Sunday of Advent – December 24, 2006¹
St. John's Episcopal Church, Charleston, WV
Luke 1:39-49 – Mary Visits Elizabeth**

The Rev. Kent Higgins

Because of the calendar, this is one of those confusing days where we start out in the purple of Advent, and end up in the white of Christmas. It is a day on which we give thanks for the altar guild.²

And here we are in this single service at nine-thirty instead of the normal eight and ten-thirty services, I am very well aware that there are those among you who are convinced in the depth of your souls that God prefers to be worshiped at eight o'clock – Eastern time.

There are also those of you who know, just as intensely, that neither you nor the Almighty has had your first cup of coffee at eight o'clock, and that the only reason to arrive in church before ten-thirty is to make an early tee time in the summer!

It is heartening to know that each of you was willing to give up a little, in order to gather together for the Lord's supper. It is no exaggeration to say that the Episcopal Church today needs more people who are willing to give a little here and there, to focus on the things that unite us.

¹ This is my first sermon at St. John's, my home parish, as a Deacon, having been ordained by Bishop Klusmeyer December 16, 2006, at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Charleston, WV

² The fourth Sunday in Advent in the Year of Our Lord 2006 falls on Christmas Eve.

And what could be more uniting than this intensely powerful passage from Saint Luke's Gospel: "*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.*"

Our spirits rejoice as well, for this afternoon and tonight, this church will be filled to celebrate the birth of a little child.

So how shall we spend our time in this last sermon for Advent?

We could make the point that prophets of the Hebrew Bible who were called to do God's will responded "Here am I, send me." Mary takes her rightful place in those exalted ranks in the famous words we know as the magnificat: "My soul magnifies the Lord,⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."³ Surely Mary is deserving of adoration for her faithfulness.

Alternatively, we could make the point that it was two women who brought John and Jesus into this world, and yet, until recently, women could not serve on vestries in the Episcopal Church, nor could they be delegates to conventions, nor could they be ordained. I rejoice that we seem to be leaving that "traditional" way of doing things behind us. I rejoice that a woman has been installed as our presiding bishop.

My joy is not because of the currently-popular term of "inclusion," with which some have labeled our church. It is a fitting label, especially here in this parish, but God doesn't call us to inclusion, which carries with it the idea that those of us already here will move over a bit to make room for those newly arrived. God calls us instead to love one another, and it is the visible presence of that love, here in this wonderful place, which brings me such joy.

³ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Lk 1:46

But rather than either of those themes, let us spend this last sermon in Advent thinking about the two mothers involved. In many ways, they were just like people today. Think about how Elizabeth and Mary were prepared to be mothers, how they thought about their children long before the boys were conceived.

And there's something else. Think about the new baby, and how we're going to help bring him into our family. The church year is not just an abstract teaching concept. In many ways, it is a special kind of reality in which the actual events recur, and one of those recurring and real events is the birth of Jesus.

Remember with me how you learned whatever it is you know about rearing a child. I'm not talking about whether or not you read Doctor Spock (and for those of you who don't know the book, I assure you your parents have copies available), but how you learned the role you were expected to play.

Perhaps a story will jog your memory.

A couple of summers ago, I was working in my yard, and I looked up to see a little girl pushing her baby buggy up Dogwood Road. She was talking to the doll. I looked at that little girl, and knew that Mary had done the same thing. The little girl was in training to be a mother. Mary may not have had a stroller, but surely she had a doll. She talked to the doll, and imagined her own children. She thought about who her husband would be. She thought about the kind of home she would have, and how her children would grow up.

We don't know in advance how a child will turn out. Some children are born into families with considerable material advantage, and others are born into poverty.

Some children are reared in loving families, and others are brought up in – to say the least – difficult conditions.

Some children are healthy from the day they are born; others have to fight for their very lives.

As the young girl Mary, and the old woman Elizabeth, talked of the children they would bring into the world, they must have wondered what adventures life would bring them. They must have expressed to one another their hopes and dreams.

But not knowing what the future would bring, and to her everlasting credit, Mary relies on God's wisdom. The "Song of Mary" is a song of praise to God. It is a song we join in singing, for we too rely on God's wisdom to show us the things we need to do, and the persons we need to be. There is no other source of guidance wise enough to give us that direction.

And at the dark times that come into each of our lives, there is no other source of strength that can sustain us, to keep us doing what has to be done.

How wonderful Mary must have felt on the night her baby was born. Any of us who have looked at or held a new-born child know what Mary felt.

It's not pride. It's not "look what I've done."

It's a sense that you have just been present for a miracle. A *child* has been born. There is no other human feeling or experience to equal it.

And the child trusts and relies on us absolutely. We pick him up, hold him, sing to him, feed him, and we and the child become one. We hope and pray that life will bring good things to the child. And I'm sure Mary did all of this with her first-born son Jesus.

We will, tonight, re-live the birth of that child, and the miracle will be new once more.

The last step in our Advent preparation, is to decide how we will deal with the newest member of our family. For it is true today, as it was true for Mary two-thousand years ago, that the child Jesus requires care and nurturing.

The child is our responsibility. What sort of world will we make for him? What example will we set? What behaviors will we model so the child knows from our example what it means to love one another?

The child will inform and change our lives. Everyone of you who has experienced the growth of a child knows this to be true. The child requires sacrifice on our part to support him. The child desperately needs for us to work together, to love him and to love one another.

Without care, no child can flourish and grow. But when surrounded by a loving family of parents, of uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters, cousins, and yes, friends and neighbors, when a child has that, everything is possible.

As a community, Saint John's will face many changes in the coming year.⁴ Old friends will move on, and new friends will arrive. Especially this year, we must bring the Christ child here among us, into our family and into our hearts, where we will see him grow in our love, and in our strength, and in our joy.

When we do that, all will be well.

For each of us, it will be right to echo the words of Mary: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

⁴ The rector of St. John's, the Rev. Dr. Karl Ruttan, is retiring from active ministry at the end of 2006.