

Sermon from 12/20/2009

Birth Means Future Promises

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Norwood, Ohio

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Texts: Psalm 146, Luke 1:39-55

Our 2nd scripture this morning is from Luke, chapter 1:39-55. This is part of Luke's extended 'Birth Narrative', a meeting between Mary and Elizabeth, including Mary's Song, the Magnificat.

If you have been in a Bible studies with me, you've probably figure out that I really like to look at scripture in context. I want to know when and why this is incident is happening, who these people are, what led up to this, and where it's going. I want to know how it fits into the big picture.

So let me give you a little context for this scripture.

This is, as far as I know, the only meeting between Mary and Elizabeth reported in the Bible. They most certainly knew each other before this meeting. Luke tells us they are cousins, probably distant cousins because their people tracked family ties back thousands of years, all the way back to the 12 descendents of Jacob.

Mary and Elizabeth had very little in common.

Mary was young, just past puberty we believe, and looking forward to marriage, children, running a household of her own. At that age, dreams are bright. The man who asks you to marry him will be handsome, kind and deeply in love with you. He won't have bad breath in the morning, and he'll always give you the most romantic gifts.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, was, as Luke politely put it, "getting on in years." Elizabeth and her husband have no children, and the chance of that happening was getting less and less as each year passed. Years ago, she had settled into the routine of being a priest's wife:

- She was used to being alone for months at a time when he was on duty at the Temple in distant Jerusalem,
- She was used to the neighbors' expectations of her high piety since she was the both a priest's wife and a priest's daughter ,
- She was even used to the whispered rumors about what she could have done that would have displeased God so much that he had not given her a son.

That's Mary and Elizabeth. What brought them together was the one thing they had in common: God had made a promise to each of them.

Elizabeth's promise came, how else, through her husband Zechariah when the angel Gabriel appeared to him in the Temple:

Luke 1:13a-17ⁱ

“Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Then just a few months later, Gabriel also visited Mary, and gave her a Promise from God:

Luke 1:31-33

“And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Two women. Two Promises.

And that's where our second scripture begins, a meeting between Elizabeth and Mary.

As Luke tells us...

Luke 1: 39-55

39 In 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."

46 And Mary said,

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

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

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

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

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

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

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

- ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
- ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
- ⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

And that brings us to the message for this 4th week of Advent, a message about Promises. Future Promises.

Promises are always about the Future. With a promise, you don't just do something here and now. You *promise* to do it in the future.

Sometimes the fulfillment of the promise happens soon; other times we have to wait for it. Sometimes the promise is fulfilled with one single event; other times it is continuous, ongoing.

When my husband and I bought our house this summer: we signed a contract that was a 'promise' to exchange a certain amount of money for the deed to the house on a certain FUTURE date. The date came; the money and deed changed hands; the contract, the 'promise', was fulfilled. Complete.

On the other hand, my nephew got married last weekend. He and his new wife made promises to each other. The fulfillment of those promises started, officially, there at the ceremony, and they will continue to be fulfilled far into the future.

The season of Advent is about God's Promises.

What are God's Promises?

The Bible is full of them:

- Abraham was to be the father of a great nationⁱⁱ
- The Israelites were to settle in a land of Milk and Honeyⁱⁱⁱ
- Sarah, Hannah, Rachel, Elizabeth, the Shunammite woman were to each have children.^{iv}
- A Root would spring from Jesse^v
- The wolf would lay down with the Lamb^{vi}
- Jesus will return
- And in the end, a place of perfect peace, a new heaven and earth.^{vii}

The problem with God's promises is that, well, they don't seem very real to us today. They're just nice metaphors for the way we hope the world will be...someday...maybe.

But right now there is

Christmas shopping to do,
and bills to pay,
and emails to answer,
and homework to do,
and oil changes,
and prescriptions to fill,
and jobs to find,
and dogs to feed,
and relatives to make peace with,

and dinner to cook,
and lawns to mow or snow to shovel,
and dishes to wash,
and so many things happening between the time we get up and the time we finally get to bed (much too late, if you're like me), that God's promises seem distant, irrelevant, as insubstantial as morning mist.

But the problem is NOT with God's Promises; no, it's with our expectations. We're just so busy and distracted that we don't EXPECT the Promises to apply now, to apply to us.

But what if...

What if the things God promises are meant for you and me?
What if they are meant for Today?

Let's look at some of the promises we've heard this morning in Psalm 146, and imagine that they are for us, for now.

Psalm 146 says:

“The Lord sets the prisoners free” (v 7b)

Does that make you think of people unjustly imprisoned, of the Innocence Project^{viii}, which reviews cases of convicted criminals and sometimes proves their innocence?
Or do you think of famous people jailed for their stand on righteous causes, like Nelson Mandela? Or Gandhi or Martin Luther King jr?

Or do you ever think about yourself when God promises to set the prisoners free?
You may not be in jail, but most of us are prisoners of something.

Are you a prisoner of Fear?
Are there things you would do to serve God if you weren't afraid of the consequences or cost?

Are you a prisoner of your Past?
Do past mistakes and even past victories, hang over your head, limiting your choices and actions?

Are you a prisoner of your own self-image?
Has the image you've carefully cultivated for yourself become a straightjacket? Do you think of yourself as This Particular Thing and long to be something else?

Are you addicted to something, really addicted?
Whether it's cigarettes or drugs or sex or video games, does it control your life?

God promises to free you from your prison.

Psalm 146 says

“The Lord opens the eyes of the blind?” (v 8)

What's YOUR blind spot?

What are you unable to see or understand? Is there some personal or public issue that seems so clear, so obvious to YOU that you just can't understand how someone has a different opinion? Is there a need or a problem you won't acknowledge? Do you listen when your children or your employees or your family talk to you? Or do you only hear what you expect them to say?

God promises to open your blind eyes, and open your deaf ears.

Psalm 146 says

“The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down” (v 8)

What is weighing on your heart? What responsibilities are wearing you down and taking the joy from your life?

Give them to God, for God promises to lift you up.

Psalm 146 says

“The Lord watches over the strangers” (v9)

Where do you feel like a stranger, an outsider? Maybe you’re new in the neighborhood, or at work. Maybe you’re new here at Zion.

God promises you a home.

Psalm 146 says

“he upholds the orphan and the widow” (v9)

Do you feel alone, abandoned, without support?

God promises to provide for you.

For these are the promises of Advent. This is how Jesus Christ comes. God has made all these great promises to us, and God will fulfill them. Not just today and done. But from this point forward.

You say you don’t believe God has made you a promise?

Ah, Like I said earlier, THAT is the Problem. You think God’s promises are for other people or for other times, either past or future. But I’m telling you, you’re wrong.

To receive God’s Promises to you, all you have to do is ...

Believe.

Claim them as your own.

Didn’t you hear what Elizabeth said to Mary?

“Blessed is ~~she~~ (the one) who believes that there will be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her (or him) by the Lord.” (Luke 1:45)

For our Advent Promises, our Future Promises start here. That babe about to be born in the manger is for you. That beautiful package under the Christmas tree is yours to unwrap.

The Promises of God are close at hand.

Claim God’s Promises this Christmas.

Believe.

Believe in Christmas.

ⁱ All scriptures are from the NRSV translation

ⁱⁱ Genesis 15:1-6

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 3:1-10

^{iv} Women who were promised children in, respectively, Genesis 18: 1-15, 1Samuel 1:1-20, Genesis 30: 1-2, 22-24, Luke 1:5-17, 2Kings 4:8-17

^v Isaiah 11:1-2

^{vi} Isaiah 11:6-9

^{vii} Revelation 21: 1-7

^{viii} The Innocence Project, <http://www.innocenceproject.org/>