

The Rev. Michael C. Fedewa

4th Sunday of Advent

December 24, 2006

Year C

Luke 1:39-56

Shepherds and kings, sheep and oxen, angels and stars, Mary, Joseph and the baby in the manger. These are the stars, the cast of every Christmas pageant ever staged. These are the figures in every manger scene, these are portrayed in every Christmas card, every Christmas painting. These are put together in our Christmas imaginations, in our Christmas story telling. This weekend, we meet in the Gospel another person, never present in our pageants or cards, never present in our manger scenes. This 4th Sunday of Advent we meet Elizabeth, a kinswoman, an aunt of Mary. It is Elizabeth's fate to miss the limelight, to be left out. Left out of pageants, paintings and manger scenes. This weekend, for many she is left out completely. Given the fact that the 4th Sunday of Advent is Christmas eve, attendance at Churches around the world will be less than the usual Sunday. Most will come this evening never having heard of Elizabeth.

Elizabeth is a transition person. She is the wife of Zechariah, a priest of the temple in Jerusalem. According to Luke Elizabeth and Zechariah were righteous and blameless, steadfast in observing the commandments of the Lord. They were childless, advanced in years and barren. Zechariah, while attending to his duties as priest in the sanctuary is visited by an angel, who announces that his wife, Elizabeth will conceive and bear a son, John the Baptist. John will be great in the eyes of the people and will prepare Israel for the coming of the Lord.

Zechariah struggles to believe. "My wife and I are old, how will this be?" Because of his doubt, Zechariah is unable to speak until after the birth of John has taken place.

Elizabeth, the old barren one, conceives a child. At that time she proclaims with confidence that this has been done by the Lord. "The Lord has looked on me with favor and taken away the disgrace I have carried."

Zechariah and Elizabeth symbolize that the time of waiting is past. The centuries of waiting for the Coming God are drawing to an end. Hope that had grown barren will soon miraculously give birth. In Elizabeth, the barren one, the hope of new life is born. Out of the faith and hope of Elizabeth God gives birth to the impossible.

A few months later, in a village of Nazareth, the angel appears to a virgin Mary. Mary says yes to the invitation given through the angel, and consent to be the Mother of God. As a proof of this, Mary is told that Elizabeth has conceived in her old age, because "with God all things are possible". Then, Luke tells us, the angel departs.

I wonder what happened in the weeks to come to Mary. I wonder how she told Joseph. I wonder how she told her family. I wonder how she told the neighbors. Luke does not talk to us about the reaction of her family, nor the first reaction of Joseph. Luke does not tell us about the reaction of the townsfolk. Can you imagine the gossip that must have spread around town? Can

you imagine the snickers, the sarcastic comments, the anger, the gossip? “An angel, God’s son, the Holy Spirit.....yeah, right.”

The story picks up in today’s Gospel, as Mary heads for the hills makes her way with haste to visit Elizabeth. Perhaps, in her fear she needed to see the sign the angel promised. Perhaps, Mary needed to escape the gossip in Nazareth. Whatever the reason for her journey, when she arrives, Elizabeth immediately exclaims that Mary is blessed. Once again, as she had done at the time of her own un-anticipated pregnancy, Elizabeth responds with joy filled hope and exultation. “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

After Elizabeth’s exclamation, Mary proclaims her wonderful song of Magnificat. After, Elizabeth lifts the lowly spirit of Mary, Mary proclaims God will lift all the lowly and fill all the hungry with food. The Lord will bring mercy to all. The Lord will scatter the proud, cast down the mighty, and send the rich away empty. Elizabeth’s joy enables Mary to face her own doubts and to face down the ridicule of the people of Nazareth.

Long before the birth of Jesus, Elizabeth disappears from Luke’s Gospel. She is not there at the manger in Bethlehem. It is not clear that Elizabeth and Mary ever met again. But, I wonder if the words of Elizabeth continued to give strength to Mary. I wonder if Mary remembered Elizabeth’s joy filled words of hope as she watched Jesus grow and mature. As she watched him teach and heal. I wonder if she remembered and found strength in those words when she watched Jesus suffer and die.

Today, as we gaze on all the manger scenes, as we look at all the Christmas cards we will not see Elizabeth. On this Christmas Eve, the 4th Sunday of Advent, few will even hear of Elizabeth. But here we are and we remember her. We remember and give thanks for Elizabeth and the part she played in the life of Mary. We give thanks for Elizabeth as she has been part of our lives. I give thanks for my Grandmother Elizabeth and the part she played in my life. Elizabeth as she has come to you in the person who believed you when others doubted. Elizabeth as she has come to you and stood by you when others ridiculed. Elizabeth has come to you as she has praised you when other’s condemned, as she lifted you up when others put you down. We give thanks for those who said words to us long ago that still give us strength today.

As we give thanks. We pray, may we have the courage to be Elizabeth in our day.

As others stand against, may we stand with.

As others doubt may we believe.

As others condemn, may we rejoice.

As others ridicule, may we praise.

As others curse, may we bless.