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Advent 4 C – Dec. 19, 2022

“Mary’s Witness”

Read: Luke 1: 39 - 55 /Memorize: Luke 1: 45

There is nothing more exciting than a baby being born. It doesn’t matter your status in life, families typically rejoice at the birth of a child. People are happy to hear when somebody says they are expecting. When Prince Harry and his wife, Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, had their firstborn, Archie, Whole Foods Market even named a cheese after him, which was described as “Slightly sweet and nutty.”

That might be an apt description of children, especially at Christmas time. They say endearing things but they are a little crazy with excitement for Santa to come. For any who might be concerned if they made the good list, I have some really good news.

It doesn’t matter if you’ve been good or bad this year, Jesus still came for you. The Christmas story, so full of tenderness and love, is for all. A young woman knew that God was at work in her life. Her cousin Elizabeth, knew it, too.

We’re told by Luke that when Mary greeted Elizabeth the baby in her womb leapt. She proclaimed, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb ... ” In response, Mary sang that beautiful song of joy, called the Magnificat, which we heard in our Gospel reading today.

Let’s spend some time thinking about Mary and the impact of Jesus’ birth. She was a young woman. She does seem to be wise beyond her years. Her final response to the angel, “May it be as you have said,” makes me think that. Of all the people in the world, her experience of Jesus’ birth, life, death and resurrection was the most intimate of all. Just imagine the Son of God calling you mom. I wonder what lessons she might want to share with us, as the mother of God’s Messiah.

I think a first lesson Mary would share with us is that God is working in the small things of the universe. Think about it. The creator of the universe, set aside His majesty and authority to be born as a tiny baby to a poor young woman. He could have just left us to our own devices, but He didn't. God came as a poor and helpless baby to show us that He loves us enough to enter into our daily lives.

Looking for a special gift to give? How about sharing the best gift ever? Jesus! In Jesus, God wrapped Himself inside the unexpected. It's easy to miss the joy of Christmas because we're looking for some big thing. Yet, consider this, the actual Christmas story is contained in less than one chapter of the Bible. It's really composed of moments of joy when God shared the message of the coming of the Messiah to humble, poor people: nobodies like shepherds, an old lady and perhaps we might add ourselves to that list.

Henri Nouwen, a Dutch priest and writer, tells of a small wooden nativity scene that he saw placed beneath a church altar. The figures of Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus were hand-carved. They were very simple; smaller than a human hand. Not terribly impressive!

Yet, just below the altar was a light. When it shone, the figurines cast a huge shadow on the wall behind them. In this he saw the message of the Christmas story. In Nouwen's words, "God's light shining on this small humble family cast large hopeful shadows on our life and our world."

Perhaps, we see that light of God shining more clearly at this time of year through humble people in simple acts of love. Ray Mohler Jr. was four years old when he woke up with hip pain so severe that his parents took him to the hospital. The doctors diagnosed him with a rare and painful, but treatable hip disorder. After about eight hours in the hospital, they discharged him.

It was a really scary experience for the little boy. After he returned home, Ray couldn't stop thinking about the kids he had met who had to stay in the hospital, some for days, weeks or even months. He determined that he could do something to make the experience a little less frightening.

At Christmas, Ray donated half his Christmas and birthday presents to the children at his local hospital. Two years later when Ray was six, he and his family founded the Little Saint Nick Foundation. Last year, they gave away over 500,000 toys. As we are reminded in the Bible, "a little child will lead them ..."

God came as a baby to bring us life. He used a six year old boy to spread joy and hope at Christmas. God can use you and me to share His joy, hope and love, also. The message of Christmas is that God often works in the small things.

I think a lesson Mary would share with us is that God works in difficult circumstances. As we look at the Christmas story we see God never chooses the easiest path to accomplish His will. There are all sorts of obstacles to overcome, including a king who is willing to kill babies to prevent competition for his throne. What could possibly be God's logic in sending the Christ child, to these people, in this time and place?

Why doesn't God choose the easiest path for accomplishing His will? When you think about that, God says His light shines in the darkness. The dark times are the difficult times where we often feel the weakest. He says His power is greatest in our weakness and His grace shows up when we least expect it. The easiest path would not result in as much growth for us and Him getting glory for it.

A third lesson Mary would share with us is God is working in everyone who will open their heart to Him. God never forces anyone to accept Him. He sent an angel to speak to Mary about the mission God had for her and she agreed. Joseph did question things, but when God spoke to him in a dream, he accepted and took Mary home as his wife. If you think about it, God came in the most unlikely manner, to the most unlikely people, at the most unlikely time so that we would not be overwhelmed by His power, but overjoyed by His love.

Richard Crenna was an actor when I was growing up. Probably most famous for his role as a Colonel in three Rambo movies. If you're wondering who Rambo is, google it. Crenna tells the story of opening his heart to the message of Jesus when he was a teenager.

When Crenna was alive he would tell the story that he and his parents never celebrated a "normal" family Christmas. The Crenna' owned a residential hotel in downtown Los Angeles. Richard described the hotel residents as "unfortunates." He envied friends who talked about their Christmas traditions. Instead of a family Christmas tree, the Crenna' had a tree in the hotel lobby. Christmas dinner was a meal at a local restaurant. At sixteen, he was invited to New York City for a big audition. He was scheduled to leave right after Christmas.

That Christmas Eve, his parents announced that they were having a Christmas party. They led Richard down to the hotel lobby. It was filled with the hotel's "unfortunates." All the residents, even the men he had "mimicked relentlessly" gathered to congratulate him, wish him luck and give him gifts that set him up for his new life.

Crenna would write later, "It was now clear; the men and women I had once written off as "has-beens and weirdos" were instead children of the Most High God. As I got on the train to New York a man said to me, 'How was your holiday?' I said, 'It was my best Christmas ever. I spent it ... with my family.'" Those he once ridiculed, he now saw as his family. Only Christmas can do that for us.

His witness reminds us: God works in the small things in the universe. God works in the difficult circumstances in life. God works in everyone who opens their heart to Him. That hope fills us with joy. Mary's song has spread that joy for more than 2,000 years.

So how will your Christmas be this year? Have you opened your heart to the working of God? That's all it takes to be ready for Christmas is an open heart to Jesus to discover the joy of Christmas in your life.