

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent  
December 20, 2015  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Rev. Amy Larson

Micah 5:2-5a  
Luke 1:46b-55  
Hebrews 10:5-10  
Luke 1:39-45

[click here to read scripture passages for this Sunday](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

We hear part of Mary's story today, the part right after she welcomes a strange messenger and strange news. We can't really understand what happens in our Gospel reading today without understanding Mary's welcome, so we'll start there.

An angel shows up saying "Mary, do not be afraid, you've found favor with God". Mary is a little perplexed by this and, I'd imagine, a little afraid. The angels that we hear about in the Bible aren't the sweet, white fluffy things we hang on our Christmas trees. They are strange and so frightening that they have to say "do not be afraid" when they bring messages from God, otherwise people fall over in fear.

So Mary is a little perplexed, to say the least, when an angel shows up and greets her. But then it gets even stranger. The angel tells Mary that she will give birth to the Son of the Most High. Mary has a few questions about this - she's an unwed teenager after all. How could this be?

She also has lots of reasons to be afraid of this news. It could lead to public shame, it could bring dishonor to her family, it could leave her destitute and alone without the support of her father or a husband. So, Mary engages the angel in some conversation. She asks the angel "how can this be?" He tells Mary that her elderly cousin Elizabeth, the one who hadn't been able to have a child for years, is pregnant. He assures Mary that nothing will be impossible for God.

Mary listens to this strange messenger and then she chooses to welcome the news he brings. She says "here I am. God's servant, let it be with me as you say." Mary welcomes and agrees to this news even with all the potential disruption and risk it poses for her.

Then after all of this, Mary "sets out and goes with haste" to her cousin Elizabeth. This is the part of her story that we heard in our Gospel reading today. Mary goes to be with her cousin who also is having a most unlikely pregnancy. And, I imagine, she runs to Elizabeth because she is in desperate need of welcome and refuge. After Mary's welcomed the strange news the angel brings, after she's welcomed the son of God into her body and her life, as the reality of what she's agreed to begins to sink in, Mary needs to be welcomed. She needs to be received with open arms, loved and blessed.

And that is just what Elizabeth does. Before Mary can even tell her what has happened, Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, recognizes that Mary carries the son of God within her. Elizabeth sees the fullness of who Mary now is. Elizabeth sees a teenaged, unwed mother but she sees much more than that. She sees how God is

present in Mary and in Mary's life in this most strange and mysterious way. Elizabeth sees and then welcomes all of who Mary is. She takes Mary in, enfolds her and blesses her.

Elizabeth's blessing sets Mary free from any fear and shame. It sets her free to sing - and oh how she sings. She sings not only about what this all means for her, but what it means for the whole world. Mary sings and as she does, she gathers the strength to participate in what God is doing for the world. Elizabeth's blessing and welcome gives Mary what she needs. When have you found such a welcome? When has someone been able to see more than the surface of your life, to see and receive the fullness and the mystery of who you are? When have you been drawn in with love and set free from fear and shame?

My prayer is that we will all experience this type of welcome in this sanctuary; for scripture shows this is the welcome God longs for each of us to know. It is the welcome God has come to give to us in Jesus.

Rev. Jan Richardson has written a beautiful poem about finding sanctuary,

I offer it as a prayer that all of us and all people will find such sanctuary in God.

#### A Blessing Called Sanctuary

You hardly knew  
how hungry you were  
to be gathered in,  
to receive the welcome  
that invited you to enter  
entirely—  
nothing of you  
found foreign or strange,  
nothing of your life  
that you were asked  
to leave behind  
or to carry in silence  
or in shame.

Tentative steps  
became settling in,  
leaning into the blessing  
that enfolds you,  
taking your place  
in the circle  
that stunned you  
with its unimagined grace.

You began to breathe again,  
to move without fear,  
to speak with abandon  
the words you carried  
in your bones,  
that echoed in your being.

You learned to sing.

But the deal with this blessing  
is that it will not leave you alone,  
will not let you linger  
in safety,  
in stasis.

The time will come  
when this blessing  
will ask you to leave,  
not because it has tired of you  
but because it desires for you  
to become the sanctuary  
that you have found—

to speak your word  
into the world,  
to tell what you have heard  
with your own ears,  
seen with your own eyes,  
known in your own heart:  
that you are beloved,  
precious child of God,  
beautiful to behold,\*  
and you are welcome  
and more than welcome  
here.

In **this** sanctuary, may we all know that we are welcome, and more than welcome here. May we be able to breathe easily, to move without fear, to speak and sing freely. May we know that we are beloved, precious children of God and beautiful to behold. And then may we go out from here to extend sanctuary to others.

For just as God longs to welcome us, God longs for us to welcome others, and especially, to welcome the stranger. This is a near constant refrain in scripture - that we are called to welcome the stranger and the things that seem strange to us. And powerful things happen when we do.

When Mary welcomes the strange messenger and his strange news, she becomes the mother of God's son. When Elizabeth welcomes and blesses the strange thing she sees in Mary, she sets Mary free to join in God's work in the world.

When we welcome strangers, or even welcome what seems strange in people we think we know, we get the chance to see beyond the surface. We get to glimpse the fullness of who they are - beloved, precious children of God and beautiful to behold. We get to see how God works in strange and mysterious and often hidden ways. And we may even get to help God in setting people free from fear and shame.

This week as we gather for worship, as we gather with family and friends to celebrate, we get lots of opportunities to welcome strangers and to welcome strange things in the people we know best. If your family is anything like mine, there will be plenty of chance to deal with things that seem odd or different, things that usually put us off or irritate us.

But when we're tempted to feel annoyed or disturbed this week, or this new year, let's take it as an opportunity to notice and show kindness to those who make us uncomfortable. When your relative won't stop talking about his favorite politician, when another keeps interrupting, when a stranger comes to worship, when you encounter someone who makes you uncomfortable as you travel, let that remind you to take a closer look at that precious child of God.

This is what they need, it is what we need to practice - seeing God at work. It is what our world needs because being seen and being welcomed can help reduce people's fear and shame. And, God knows, our world needs less of the fear and shame that drive hatred and violence.

Of course, It can be frightening to welcome strangers, but another core theme of scripture is "do not be afraid." We do not need to fear. God has come to welcome, to love, and to free all people. God is at work in strange and mysterious ways even when everything seems frightening; and God gives us all that we need to join in the work of welcoming others.

Thanks be to God.