

Preacher: Ruth Preston Schilk
Date: Dec. 20, 2009 Advent IV
Scripture: Luke 1:39-56
Sermon: *Special Delivery!*

We try not to stare, but sometimes it can't be helped. Seeing a 'very' pregnant woman can make us wonder how skin can stretch *sooo* much. We marvel at how her womb can grow from the size of her fist to hold a full-term baby.

Yet, after the infant is born, so often we coo, "Oh, look how **tiny** he is!" Somehow the 'before' and the 'after' seem so different. The baby seemed bigger when it was **inside** its mother than on the **outside**, just after it was born.

English Christian author C.S. Lewis picks up on this paradox in a very special way in his seventh book from the Narnia Chronicles, *The Last Battle*. In the story, Lucy was with some of her friends in Narnia. During a battle they were forced into a stable where they make a surprising discovery:

"It seems" said Tirian... "that the Stable seen from within and the Stable seen from without are two different places."

"Yes," said the Lord Digory. "Its inside is bigger than its outside."

"Yes," said Queen Lucy. "In our world too, a Stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world."

As Mary, reflected on the child Jesus, the Son of God, the Saviour --growing within her womb, surely *she* knew that he would be bigger than the whole world! Her song proclaims **that** as she praises God for the blessing she has received and the blessing she will bear for God's people.

Rather than picturing Mary as the demure, smooth-skinned, refined Madonna depicted by artists over the centuries, we might need to ‘re-paint’ our image of her to more accurately reflect her strength and abilities. I was reminded recently that “Mary’s solitary journey in the early stages of her pregnancy to visit her relative Elizabeth would have required her to be a sturdy person, [someone] with considerable stamina and endurance. She would have had definite muscles to travel ‘with haste to the hill country’ and likely roughened hands and chapped lips of outdoor life too.” [Mary Schertz]

Mary not only had physical strength to carry and give birth to her **child**, she had strength to carry her **faith** to term too. “God had entrusted her with the message of the radical social upheaval that was to come, when the rich and powerful would be put off their thrones, the poor would be uplifted, and the hungry would be fed. It had already come true in her. She was a poor Jewish woman, a victim of oppression by class, race, and gender. You could not get much lower in those days than to be a woman in a patriarchal society, a Jew under Roman occupation, and a peasant in a land of plenty. But Mary was the chosen vessel of God’s incarnation; God’s promises had already been [delivered] in her flesh” [Joyce Hollyday, *Clothed with the Sun*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994, p. 221).

Waiting for the end of a nine-month pregnancy and the birth of a baby can seem like a long time – and even longer if there are complications. But this is such a short span of time in comparison to how long God has been taking action throughout history. “Mary recognized that God’s promise to her was in step with God’s actions of **always** having ‘helped his servant Israel’ (Luke 1:54) by exalting the lowly, providing for the hungry, and doing great things for those of low standing” [Virginia Wiles, *Good Ground Bible Studies: No Small Wonder*, Vol. 1:3, (Newton, KS: Faith & Life Press, 1998), p. 20].

We rejoice that God has come among us as **our** personal Saviour and Deliverer and indeed the **world's** deliverer from evil, sin, temptation, and oppression. But the world's problems didn't disappear the minute Jesus was born. Neither is 'Christmas' over when the celebrations cease and it's time to return to work or school. Christmas isn't only a day or even a season. God's work in Christ Jesus isn't limited to the time he lived on earth. This gift of salvation, of saving people physically, emotionally, economically, politically, and spiritually keeps getting bigger the more we unwrap our Saviour Jesus – and the more we allow him to unwrap *us*. Because Christ has come, the work of Christmas can begin in earnest.

Like Mary, “those who hear God's promise submit themselves to God's plan by involving themselves in God's saving work in the world” [Wiles, p. 20]. It's *our* work now. We carry on the 'labour' so to speak, of lifting up those made low and feeding the hungry.

Alice Biko, the mother of Steve Biko, a well-known anti-apartheid leader in South Africa in the 1970s, talks about both the anguish and the hope that have been part of being the mother of such a son, who while he was in the custody of the South African police, was brutally tortured and murdered in 1977:

In one of her last conversations with her son, Alice Biko told Steve how difficult it was to be always worried about him being arrested and put in jail, how she never slept at night until she knew he was home. He had responded by reminding her that Jesus had come to redeem his people and set them free.

“Are you Jesus?” she had asked impatiently. Steve had gently answered her, “No, I'm not. But I have the same job to do” [Hollyday, p. 219].

The good news found in Mary's song delivers a word of hope

and comfort to the many being raised up and filled with good things. But at the same time it declares a word of challenge to the proud who are scattered, the powerful who are brought down, and the rich who are sent away empty.

I met with someone last week who strives not to free and raise up from oppression Black South Africans but Aboriginal Southern Albertans. This person (whom I'll call Robin) was called in to investigate why in a particular school, aboriginal students did fairly well up to grade ten and yet two years later, only 2% of them graduated from grade 12. Robin succeeded in pin-pointing areas of concern, designed strategies and programmes to address the areas, monitored changes, and handily raised funds to implement the strategies. [It's not everyone who gets a personal phone call from Bill Gates]. The school and its students turned around to such a degree for a number of years-- that it caught the attention of educators across North American.

But when "the lowly" are raised up – the proud, the powerful, and the rich are shaken and fearful. They worry about having less of which to be proud, feel their power threatened, and clutch at wealth with an even more desperate grasp. After a while, Robin noticed a backlash against the success of the aboriginal students. At a graduation awards ceremony, a parent angrily told Robin, "Why are *those* students getting so many awards? My son needs all the money he can to go to university. *They* get their education for free anyway." Some teachers also began to feel threatened, saying, "Why should we help them learn better? They'll just take away our jobs."

We know that God's promises of justice have been, are, and will be remembered and delivered – in full. But when the labour is hard or seems to have stopped altogether, how are we to carry on?

Let's return to what preceded Mary's singing from her soul, what

gave her courage and joy for what she knew lay ahead. She had just met Elizabeth who had blessed her and blessed the baby within her womb and blessed her for believing that God would fulfill what was spoken to her by God. It was a time of affirmation and great joy! Even baby John wiggled with delight within Elizabeth's womb to be in the presence of his Lord's mother. In times of not knowing how to proceed in the face of opposition and sorrow, **joy** provides the proven deliverance.

Joyce Hollyday writes of witnessing to faith in a Salvadoran refugee camp in Honduras about 20 years ago. *“Preparations were underway for Christmas. A few days before, national guard members had come to the home of a young person and taken him away. When he tried to escape, they mowed him down with machine-gun fire. Later, his pregnant wife and five children gathered around his coffin as a single candle burned in the darkness.*

In another part of the camp, a group of women had surrounded an infant and sung to him in a dark tent, lit only by the light of a candle. Between the verses of the song, the anguished cries of his mother filled the air. She had fed her son through the night from an eyedropper, trying to coax some nourishment into his starving body. The singing stopped. The child was dead.

These were the events that preceded Christmas. But when Christmas Eve came, the camp burst into joyful celebration. Women baked sweet cinnamon bread in an adobe oven while men butchered hogs for the making of special pork tamales. The children made figurines for the nativity scene out of clay from the riverbed, adding local touches to the usual characters: pigs, an armadillo, and baby Jesus sleeping in a hammock. They painted beans and kernels of corn in bright colours and strung them into garlands. They made ornaments from small medicine boxes and shaped figures from the tinfoil that

wraps margarine sticks and they hung these on a tree branch. The children dressed as shepherds and passed from tent to tent, recounting the journey of “José and María” in search of shelter. “This Christmas we will celebrate as they did,” said one mother, “looking for a place where our children can be born.”

The Christmas story is their story. They know the special love of a Saviour who was also a refugee, and of a mother who fled with her child to escape Herod’s slaughter of the innocents.

Yvonne Dilling, a church worker from Indiana in the camp, told me the story of a refugee woman who once asked her why she always looked so sad and burdened. Yvonne talked about the grief she felt over all the suffering she was witnessing and her commitment to give all of herself to the struggle of the refugees. This woman gently confronted her: “Only people who expect to go back to North America in a year work the way you do. You cannot be serious about our struggle unless you play and celebrate and do those things that make it possible to give a lifetime to it.”

Every time the refugees were displaced and had to build a new camp, they immediately formed three committees: a construction committee, an education committee, and the comité de alegría– “the committee of joy.” Celebration was as basic to the life of the refugees as digging latrines and teaching their children to read” [Hollyday, pp. 224-225].

When life seems to be closing in, we return again to the joy of Jesus, our Saviour, bigger and more powerful than anything on “the outside,” because, in the end, he draws all things to himself. And indeed, may he be born in us. Amen.