

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT -C-
Micah 5: 1-4 Psalm 80 Hebrews 10: 5-10 Luke 1: 39-45
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

There is a familiar biblical motif in the first reading from Micah. The prophet prophesied at a time when the towns of Judah were being attacked by the Assyrians. It was also another period when the wealthy were unjustly afflicting the poor. God sees the travail of the little ones hemmed in by armies or cheated by the influential. The promise in Micah is that God will send a just ruler to govern God's people. The deliverer will come from Bethlehem, an insignificant town. Once again God raises up the little people in the obscure places of the world. The biblical reader knows how repeated this motif is throughout the bible. It is picked up as well in today's gospel selection from Luke. Such a biblical truth, that God is found in the obscure and the castoff, urges us to turn this biblical focus onto our lives. We are prone to measure our lives by our triumphs and achievements. We take pride in pointing to what we have accomplished, the visible signs that say we are good people, a boon to humanity. But the lowly Bethlehem will be raised up. It reminds us to look to God to act, not from the heavens in extraordinary events, but in the daily and the ordinary happenings. In the parish where I am currently preaching, a woman told me about the death of her adult daughter four years ago. She said that at the funeral the church was packed with parishioners, many of whom did not know her family but who heard about her daughter's death and showed up in sympathy. This mother said that the presence of all those people was and still is a powerful comfort to her in her grief. "I just love this parish," she told me. God works in the everyday and seeming ordinary people around us.

We pay Mary great homage for her role in the Incarnation, as well we should. But she is not chosen because she comes from royal stock; she hasn't attracted God's attention because she lives in a palace or belongs to a distinguished family. As you read the infancy texts you notice that Mary is a simple young woman. We do not even hear of her family lineage. (We do hear that Joseph was of the royal house of David.) God might have chosen one of higher social ranking as the mother of the "royal" Son. Wouldn't Jesus have been more readily accepted had he been born into a high status? Isn't that how we rank one another--by profession, education, social status, etc.?

God seems to have other criteria and other plans. Mary is very acceptable for this role because she is obedient and gives herself into God's hands. She is willing to take risks, for she trusts God. To modern ears Mary's trip to Elizabeth does not seem unusual; we have become very familiar with this story of the Visitation and modern women frequently make trips alone. But at the time of the story, it would have been very unusual for an unaccompanied young woman to make a trip that would last about 4 days. Even if she had traveled with the protection of a caravan, her solitary presence would have stirred surprise and left her subject to shameful charges. (The shame would have been compounded, since after this trip of three months she would return home, obviously pregnant.) She has taken a great leap of faith, even in what seems to modern ears as a simple visit to see an older relative. The incident takes place right after the extraordinary announcement of the angel to Mary. The one the angel called "full of grace," quickly travels to her aged cousin who is now pregnant--another extraordinary occurrence. But the story is ordinary too, a younger pregnant woman, realizing the needs for help an older woman would have during a period of pregnancy, rushes to be there for her. Is that the shape grace takes? Not some ethereal gaze or other worldly preoccupation; but a younger, more robust woman going to the help of an older one? Ever have someone "show up" in your life just in time to get you through a difficult or arduous time? Name it, "grace in the everyday," and be sure to express gratitude to God for the one who was there for you. God came to visit through them.

This preference of God for the obscure shows itself in another way in the story of Mary and Elizabeth. Mary is young, and the young are regarded as insignificant; Elizabeth is elderly--- another representative of a group of people considered less important. Her "barrenness" would have been seen as a punishment for some fault or sin on her part. God is at work here bringing life into the world and God's blessings bring about a reversal of fortunes, as Mary proclaims in her Magnificat: what is mighty is put down, what is weak is raised up. The bible is filled with such "reversal of fortune" stories, as in popular folklore, where we also hear stories of the "little guy" making good. (Remember the movie "Rocky," or the tale of Cinderella?) While the whole world's attention is distracted by the high and mighty, by the latest fad or craze, God is doing the extraordinary in the least likely places. Two pregnant women, one young and the other old, have come together to celebrate the least obvious place for God's powerful deed of salvation to begin, in the womb where all human life has its start.

It's not surprising that this story is found in Luke's Gospel. Women are shown in

this Gospel in their economic helplessness, especially if they are widows. But this Gospel also extols women's dignity, as when the woman bent over with infirmity (13:16) is called "daughter of Abraham." In the beginning of this Gospel, women appear in distinctive roles--Mary, Elizabeth and Anna. These women have voice in Luke and when they speak they are not silenced, as might have been expected in this culture. But one can go too far in extolling Luke's positive attitude towards women. He is often attributed with raising the role of women, of recognizing them and giving them voice. Recent scholarship has critiqued this supposed exaltation of women by Luke. It is pointed out, for example, that when other women speak out in Luke they are corrected. But in today's Lucan selection, the women are in a very favorable light. When Elizabeth meets Mary she manifests the traditional role of prophet, for Luke describes her as "filled with the Holy Spirit." Notice too, that she uses the Christian title for Jesus when she says, "But who am I that the mother of my Lord...." Luke has this woman anticipating the proclamation of faith that the Christian community professes--- Jesus is Lord.

This moment is also fraught with fragility. What could be more vulnerable than the two lives in their mothers' wombs? Anything might happen to them or their mothers. God's plan is enclosed in the fragility and in the strength of these two mothers-to-be. Is it possible that our efforts to do good seem to pale in the face of the enormity of what needs being done to make our world resemble more what God has in mind for it? But this story says that which starts as a small consent to serve God's purposes bears much fruit. To teach a child to read, to visit the sick, to write a letter in support of an issue of justice, to reconcile members of our family, etc., all the little acts have the potential for great things, since God is authoring them in us. What is true for Mary can be true for us, "Blessed is she/he who trusted that the Lord's words...would be fulfilled." .

QUOTABLE

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we must be saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.

---Reinhold Niebuhr

Hanukkah

(December 21st. is the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah, a festival of lights. Here's a little background on the feast.)

This Jewish home festival has its origins in Old Testament times. In the second century before Christ, the Maccabees brothers, who were Jewish, led a victorious guerilla revolt against foreign occupiers of their land and were able to rededicate the temple in Jerusalem. The word "Hanukkah" means dedication. Jewish legend states that when the temple was recaptured, all the sacred oil had been profaned except for a one-day supply. According to Jewish ritual it took eight days to sanctify new oil. But a miracle happened in that the small allotment of oil burned for the entire eight days.

Today, Jewish families perform a ritual similar to our Advent wreath celebrations. Nine candles are placed on a stand called a menorah. The center candle is lit first, and then each day following, another candle is lit until all eight days have been observed.

MORE SUGGESTIONS FROM OUR READERS FOR CHRISTMAS CHILDREN'S MASS:

This lay grandmother would suggest using two Christmas stockings for a homily--- a regular stocking with toys for kids, and a stocking representing G.K. Chesterton's idea of Christmas stockings "What has happened to me has been the very reverse of what appears to be the experience of most of my friends. Instead of dwindling to a point, Santa Claus has grown larger and larger in my mind and fills almost the whole of it. It happened in this way. As a child I was faced with a phenomenon requiring explanation. I hung up at the end of my bed an empty stocking, which in the morning became a full stocking. I had done nothing to produce the things that filled it. I had not worked for them or made them or helped to make them. I had not even been good -- far from it. And the explanation was that a certain being whom people called Santa Claus was benevolently disposed toward me. What we believed was that a certain benevolent agency did give us those toys for nothing. And, as I say, I believe it still. I have merely extended the idea. Then I only wondered who put the toys in the stocking. Now I wonder who put the stocking by the bed, and the bed in the room, and the room in the house, and the house on the planet, and the great planet in the void. Once I only thanked Santa for a few dolls

and crackers, now, I thank him for stars and street faces, and wine and the great sea. Once I thought it delightful and astonishing to find a present so big that it only went halfway into the stocking. Now I am delighted and astonished every morning to find a present so big that it takes two stockings to hold it and then leaves a great deal outside. It is the large and preposterous present of myself, as to the origin of which I can offer no suggestion except that Santa Claus gave it to me in a fit of particularly good will."

From *Spiritual Literacy*----- *Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life* by Frederick and Mary Ann Brussat, Scribner, 1996, p.267. Thanks to Dr. Deb Norton for this message. I love the idea of using Santa as a child's conception of God, the miraculous loving giver of every gift and everything and everyone. I think this is awfully long to try to put in First Impressions, but I couldn't resist sending it anyway.

----- Dr. Bernadette Page, Durham, N.C.

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"Blessings on your preaching",
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