

December 19, 2021 - 4th Sunday of Advent - a reflection

Micah 5:2-5a; Psalm 80:1-7; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55

Promise

“The Lord God said, when time was full and the ancient pledge was honoured, he said a virgin will conceive and give birth to the Promise” - “The Promise was love and the Promise was life, the Promise meant Light for the world. Living proof the Lord God saves for the name of the Promise was Jesus”. (Michael Card)

The words quoted above come from a song I learned during my work as a Youth leader in Kirkland Lake back in the 1980's. The stories we read in Luke's Gospel are stories that are meant to assure us that the promises of God are real and true. Those promises which are found in many of the books of the Bible and which can inspire hope in the hearts of God's people. In the darkness of this particular season of our lives which has its own share of difficulties and hardships it is sometimes difficult to believe in promises, however the promises are true. One of the things I have learned is that sometimes promises come true and I don't notice. The large promise of God to rescue his people did not come true in the way his people expected but we attest to the fact that God was faithful to his promise of rescue in a much more beautiful and profound way than the simple ideas of his people. What a startling method God chose to bring about the promise of rescue, of salvation for his people.

Luke begins his 'orderly account' with the story that God brought joy to an elderly couple who had, for years, hoped for a child. The priest, Zechariah, while serving in the temple was visited by an angel who made the unbelievable announcement and caused Zechariah to become mute because he doubted the power of God to accomplish what had been promised. His wife Elizabeth became pregnant with a son who would grow up to become the announcer of the arrival of the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. As a child of Zechariah John inherited the office of priest but was guided by the Holy Spirit to fulfill that role, not in the Temple, but on the banks of the Jordan River. It was from a priest's mouth that the identity of Jesus as the Lamb of God was spoken following the Jesus' baptism. Quite a surprising development. God had promised salvation along with an announcer of that plan and John was born to fulfill that role and his birth was a surprise to this elderly couple.

Following his visit to Zechariah the angel Gabriel visited a young peasant girl who lived in Nazareth. We all know the story of how young Mary accepted the news that she would become pregnant even though she was, at the time, not married. “Let it be to me according to your word”, Mary said. In his announcement to her Gabriel mentioned Mary's relative Elizabeth as a sort of proof that God was able to accomplish anything God wished to accomplish. Possibly prompted by that news Mary set out to

visit Elizabeth and another indication of the truth of the promise was given. Once again a surprising development in the story of God's salvation, of God's rescue plan. A young peasant girl would become the mother of Jesus - the King of kings and Lord of lords.

In the midst of the account St. Luke delivers about the encounter between these two important women we are told that Mary's voice is recognized by the unborn child in Elizabeth's womb. "The child leaped in her womb" we are told and Elizabeth immediately connects that movement to the fact that 'the Mother of my Lord' has come. The explanation we are led to is that God's Holy Spirit had communicated with both of these women and was indeed communicating with them in the midst of this encounter. In fact, we are told, Elizabeth became filled with the Holy Spirit and uttered under this inspiration words that have been used as a devotional aid for centuries: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb". The utter astonishment that this is the way God chose to fulfil his promise of salvation never completely leaves me. The leaders in the Temple and those who daily studied scripture and were hoping for the coming Messiah did not see these events coming and yet, in hindsight, many recognized the signs of God's hand at work. Fulfilling the promises God made was done by the miracle of the incarnation and two previously unknown women were at the centre of the drama.

"And (then) Mary said, My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour..." These words, known as the Magnificat, were placed in the Evening Prayer service of the Book of Common Prayer as one of the two Canticles which were to be recited on a regular basis so the words are very familiar - at least to some. They are part of the liturgy for this celebration and they are worth the time of meditation because they speak about the ways in which God was going to fulfil the promise.

"His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation". Reverent fear comes from the awareness of the greatness of God and the awe that is inspired by that revelation. It also speaks of the willingness to follow God's ways. Mary, inspired by the Holy Spirit, declared that God's mercy rests on those in each generation who have this reverent fear of God. If that describes you then God's mercy is for you. Through whatever you are facing God's mercy is for you.

"He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts" The kind of pride described here is the pride which excludes God. The 'I don't need God' kind of pride which imagines how life should be lived with humanity at its centre. God scatters the dreams of people like that with the revelation of Jesus the Saviour.

"He has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly" God's way of fulfilling the promise is not to reward the rich and powerful but to give power to the lowly. Mary is a

good example - unknown and living in a small village - lifted by God's act into prominence.

"He has filled the hungry with good things and set the rich away empty" Again we see the sort of 'upside down' nature of God which is so very different from the plans made by the rich and famous. It is no wonder that even the devoted scholars were surprised and so many missed the significance of these seemingly unimportant events.

Luke, in a wonderful way, highlights these two wonderful women who were brought to centre stage in the drama that is God's delivery of the promise of salvation. It was done, as Mary reminded us, 'according to the promise God made to our ancestor Abraham, and his seed, forever.' The Lord God made a Promise and fulfilled that in and through Jesus the Messiah and you and I are invited to be a part of the ongoing effects of that fulfillment. As the Spirit of God continues to bring salvation to God's people we are asked to be part of lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things. This story reminds me to open my mind and heart to the surprising ways God goes about accomplishing his work because those surprises continue in our day and age. As we prepare for the celebration of our Saviour's birth may we also make our hearts ready for the surprises and trust in the promise of God to bring salvation, rescue, into our lives and the lives of those we know and may we offer ourselves in service to the God of promise.

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