

Women's Approach to Christmas 2025

December 2, 2025

Manasquan Presbyterian Church, Manasquan

It is such a gift that the pastors in town feel comfortable in each others' sanctuaries and with each others' flocks! And why **wouldn't** we, since all these different sanctuaries and flocks actually belong to the Good Shepherd, to whom we also belong? The significance of the label of Presbyterian, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Quaker, Baptist, Methodist, Episcopalian, Reformed, Nazarene, pales in comparison to the importance of our identity as Christians, members of the Body of Christ. The night before He died our Lord Jesus prayed that we may all be one. In John 17 we hear our Lord's high priestly prayer. Jesus prays to the Father:

*The goal is for all of them to become one heart and mind—
Just as you, Father, are in me and I in you,
So they might be one heart and mind with us.
Then the world might believe that you, in fact, sent me.
The same glory you gave me, I gave them,
So they'll be as unified and together as we are—
I in them and you in me.
Then they'll be mature in this oneness,
And give the godless world evidence
That you've sent me and loved them
In the same way you've loved me. (John 17:21-23, The Message)*

I've seen and experienced our unity in Christ and the blessings that flow from it over the past 29 years. I've been around long enough that with today's worship service I've now given a trifecta of devotions at our Women's Approach to Christmas. The first time you invited me to preach was 2004, when we gathered at the Methodist Church, after having been originally hosted by the Church in Brielle. I'm a saver ☺, so I still have the homily I shared that day. Rereading it, I smile to see that I started by talking about dropping off my then-9-year-old daughter at a birthday party downtown. That child is now married and turned **30** this summer!

Let's look at a timeline of our Christian fellowship in this community over the years:

- In 2001 we experienced 9/11. Within the week we gathered together in Abe Voorhees Plaza for a candlelight service of remembrance, organized by the high school students, with the pastors participating. Estimates vary, but I've never heard a guestimate of less than 1,000 people there that night. Of all my worship memories, that will be one of the most powerful: looking out and seeing a sea of light in the midst of the darkness.

- The next time I preached this service was here at First Pres. in 2011. In late August of that year Hurricane Irene's wind whipped us and waves washed our shores, leaving us without electric power for days. Our Holy Trinity church sign said, "Good Night, Irene!" We sought power from on high. You may recall that a week or 2 prior to Irene, we experienced a small earthquake.
- Almost a year later, Superstorm Sandy hit. If you lived here then, you'll probably remember the storm track predictions that showed Manasquan like the bull's eye of a target, the probable point of landfall. The predictions were correct. Our Shore communities suffered. And the women and men of our Ministerium immediately hit the streets to serve. MOVE, the Manasquan Organization of Volunteer Efforts, was born in this building. Mucking out basements, handing out gallons and gallons of bottled water and of bleach, providing shelter at First Baptist for those whose homes were lost or uninhabitable, serving meals at the Methodist Church – daily, for more than a year, with outside organizations coming in to help and each of our faith families pitching in. Once again, we prayed for and received power from on high to meet the daily challenges, to be little Christs in the midst of crisis, to offer hospitality. Eventually MOVE disbanded, its work done, but the Furniture Bank continues, now coordinated through Holy Trinity but partially housed at Manasquan Methodist, and accepting willing volunteers, the use of trucks, donations, requests, from all our churches.
- Then in March of 2020 we entered COVID lockdown. We thought it would be for a few weeks. 'Probably a good thing we didn't know how long it would last or how many lives would be lost, including loved ones of those gathered here today. Some of our churches were able to initiate livestream worship which continues for many of us today, a silver-lining of the cloud of COVID. Some of us began to gather, 2 or more in His name, via Zoom or Google Hangouts Meet. Still others practiced "teleministry," phoning friends who had no computer or who had no loved ones to check on them in their isolation. I'd say handwritten notes made a comeback, too. Waving and holding signs outside windows of homes, hospitals, nursing homes. Any port in a storm, any possible way to say, "How are you? What do you need? I care. Your church family cares."

So what does this walk down memory lane have to do with Advent?? Preparing for the coming of Christmas, our annual celebration of the Lord's birth, is important, but actually the **least** important part of Advent. The word means "coming," and refers to our Lord's coming **once** in Bethlehem, His coming again at some unknown time in the **future**, and His coming among us **now** in Word and Sacrament, His presence in the last, the lost and the least, and whenever two or more of us gather in His name, as we do today, one in Christ, at Thanksgiving ecumenical worship, Lenten Soup & Scripture, Good Friday, Easter Sonrise....

Our Gospel today is the story of the Visitation, **young** pregnant Mary's visit to her **old** pregnant cousin Elizabeth. The name Elizabeth comes from the Hebrew for "God's promise." Elizabeth's son, "*the babe in [her] womb*" who upon pregnant Mary's approach "*skipped like a lamb for sheer joy*" (Luke 1:44), became the prophet John the Baptizer, entrusted with the precious assignment of announcing the

fulfillment of God's promise, the coming of the Messiah in Mary's Son Jesus. The focus of this story is usually the Virgin Mary, who sings her beautiful Magnificat, "*My soul magnifies the Lord*" in response to Elizabeth's beatitude, "*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus,*" the heart of the Hail Mary, beloved prayer of our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters. One of Mary's most beautiful titles is the *Theotokos*, that is, the Godbearer. Martin Luther honored her as the first one who said, "Fiat," "Let it be with me according to Your Word," the first one through whom the Word became flesh. But today I would like to say that, in a different sense, Elizabeth was **also** a Godbearer, and so are we.

We live in the 21st century, not the first, but Jesus Christ is still present **to** us, present **among** us, present **through** us, by God's grace. Part of our celebration of Jesus' birthday is providing for those in need, whether it be food donated to the food pantry here at Manasquan Pres., the Little Free Pantry at 1st Baptist, St. Vincent DePaul at St. Denis, or to Hope Community. We also give other gifts in Jesus' name and in His honor, like toys donated to children in need (including through this coming Saturday's Faith & Blue toy drive at St. Denis), assistance offered to refugee families, or other acts of Christian kindness. Some of us heard a Gospel from St. Matthew this past weekend, in which Jesus tells us to "*Stay awake!*" for we know neither the day nor the time of His coming. Our best way to wait faithfully for His coming again is to do what He commands today and every day: to love God with all our heart and soul and mind, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

So why is **Elizabeth** also a **Godbearer**? She's not going to give birth to the Son of God. But she and her home are a **haven** for young Mary. We don't know exactly how old Elizabeth was when the rabbit died, except that she was way past childbearing years, in human terms. But, as the archangel Gabriel said to Mary, "*Nothing will be impossible with God*" (Luke 1:37), and as author Frederick Buechner once wrote, Medicare would be picking up the tab on this labor and delivery bill!

This very young “woman,” just an early teen, is faced with a situation impossible for us to imagine: she is pregnant without ever having had intercourse. Who’s going to believe that?? She believes God, but it’s only natural that she also fears her neighbors’ and her fiancé’s. Scripture scholars tell us Mary of Nazareth may have been around 14 years old?? 14 then was different than 14 now, but are there any 14 year olds in your life? Imagine them in Mary’s position. They would need safe haven to think, to feel, to transition to a new normal. Cousin Elizabeth, in a distant hill town, offers that.

We ourselves are called to be Cousin Elizabeth to the younger women in our lives: to offer them safe haven, to offer them hard-won wisdom, to accompany them in their joys and sorrows, to be living proof that faith in God transforms life, helps us endure hardship, keeps hope alive, and makes the difference between hope and despair. We are called to share our deep **trust**, our life-long **faith** that we are blessed when we believe, like Mary and Elizabeth, that the Lord’s promises will all be fulfilled.

Many of us present today are blessed to be well-rooted in this community. Simone Weil, a 20th century Frenchwoman, a woman of deep faith, with passionate love of the poor, once wrote, “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.” **We are God-bearers** when we use our own rootedness in the faith to give stability to other women who are looking for companions on the journey, who are experiencing trials we have already endured and survived, who are in need of soul friends to walk with them. One of my favorite images of the Visitation is by Swedish artist Carl Bloch. He depicts round-bellied Elizabeth with arms opened wide to envelop young Mary. What better image of hospitality than arms opened wide, like our Lord on the cross: “I love you this much!” Whatever may come: terror attack, hurricane, superstorm, earthquake, pandemic, or other more everyday challenges, **we** can be Godbearers, opening our hearts and our homes and our church homes, echoing and living out our Lord’s message, “I love you this much.” Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham