

A Sermon for 3Advent

December 15, 2013 – Luke 1:46b-55

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The world is about to turn...

The canticle we sang together this morning – joyous, energetic, toe-tapping! – is based on the words Mary spoke to her cousin Elizabeth...words we know as the Magnificat...words sometimes known in this form as The Canticle of the Turning. For Mary, indeed, the world was about to turn. And for all humanity – throughout the ages – it was about to turn as well. The birth of the Incarnate One – God made Man – would change things forever.

In times gone by, the season of Advent was practiced in the church just as the season of Lent is practiced – in penitence and introspection and self-examination and repentance. The liturgy, readings and music appointed for today – Rose Sunday – would have been a very welcome and hopeful turn. What great joy there is to be found in all that we have heard this morning.

Somewhere, sometime, somehow we have come to see and practice this Holy Advent *not* as a time of penitence but a time of waiting. And let me tell you, waiting can be a real mixed bag. If you read an Advent devotion every day – or certainly when we are in church on Sunday – then, for a few minutes, we are reminded that we are part of Mary's anticipation that the world is about to turn.

But, oh, the rest of the time...

I found myself, the other day, right smack in the middle of what is becoming an annual crisis – waiting (desperately...frantically) for inspiration to illuminate my gift list. I realized I was feeling what may be something most of us feel at some time or another. I wanted to find *the* one stunning gift for each of my loved ones. You know...the gift that would be not only perfect but a spectacular surprise...the gift each of them received that would still be front-and-center, fully used and, yes, cherished for years to come. I realized I was waiting for some sort of misguided perfection that wouldn't happen – a perfection that I wanted to create – a perfection that isn't even important. I was truly waiting for the wrong thing.

There is some sort of worldly irony at work in **this**, one of the most *glorious* seasons of the church year, that in our lives the celebration of the Christmas holiday has led us so far from the Christmas Holy Day. Now, don't get me wrong...There is great beauty and meaning in personal, familial, and cultural traditions. We honor and participate in traditions because they bind us together, connect us with the past, and honor the many ways we share our love. But when our physical, emotional and spiritual energies are drained away as we work without ceasing – seeking after perfection – to insure that every room in our house is adorned with every decoration we have ever owned, and every Christmas cookie we have ever baked or eaten is recreated, every person we have ever known receives a greeting card, and – yes – every gift-to-end-all-gifts has been purchased, we may just be hoping to turn our own world on its ear...and, in the process, stray far, far away from the world about to turn that Mary understood.

We *are* waiting...not for the birth of a baby. That baby was born over two millennia ago. Not for the savior of the world...he lived and died and rose again once, for always. Not for the coming of God's kingdom on earth, because that, too, has already been given to us. Not for perfection of our own design and our own creation, because God's design and God's creation *is* perfection.

We wait, I think, not for some dramatic change. Although wouldn't it be wonderful to get out of bed some morning and discover that overnight the world has been transformed...that there is – well and truly – peace on earth...and all that that would signify? We can only wait, I think, for moments...the moments when we so clearly feel and see and sense God's goodness. The moments when we truly share God's goodness with others. The moments when some small act of ours can turn the world just a little bit. The moments when we stop and listen and wait to hear the voice of God that lives within us...and know joy. Moments that come...and go...but always in the belief – the faith – that with God they will come again and again.

Mary understood God's ultimate, undying and boundless love – and the power that love would have, not only in her life but in the life of all creation. She accepted God's invitation to be part of the turning of the world, and her words remind us what Isaiah understood in the same way – that God is all about unimaginable love and bountiful blessing. Isaiah said, "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing." The thirsty ground (that is us...thirsty ground) will become springs of water...and there will be a highway, called the Holy Way, and **it will be for God's people**. No traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.

I love that part! Not even fools! What that says to me is that there is a place for fools like me – that even in my foolishness, God will not let me get lost. And for all those who do not suffer fools gladly? Well, life in this kingdom of heaven on earth may just mean learning to drive along the highway of a holy life with us fools right there in the next lane, heading in the same direction. A great break for the fools, a great lesson in patience for the non-fools. Isaiah goes on to reassure us we **all** are going to obtain joy and gladness no matter what, and that sorrow and sighing are going to be things of the past.

Waiting can be a risky business. Just as we can hide inertia under the guise of patience – and just as we can excuse our lack of commitment to the work we have been called to do behind the façade of waiting for a better time or place or circumstance – so, too, can we find ourselves sitting on the side of the road waiting for the second coming instead of joining the throng on the Holy Way of the **new** creation. So, too, can we find ourselves on the wrong road altogether when we forget that creating perfection is a useless pursuit. It has already been done – and the fruits of that holy labor, which we celebrate as we celebrate Jesus' birth, have already been given to us.

Waiting can too easily become our noble-sounding excuse for doing nothing to bring about change – in our own world or the world we share with others. I can wait (and wait and wait) for just the right words to share with a grieving friend...or I can use the only words I have to give right now. We can wait until we have more time, more money, more knowledge before we offer ourselves to some cause or task or little gesture that will bring a measure of relief to someone in need...or we can give

of what we have and what we are in *this* moment. We can delay and postpone and defer and put off all manner of things worth doing, simply by convincing ourselves we aren't fully prepared. *Or*, knowing that we live in the fullness and strength of God's love, we can live by the Nike slogan and Just Do It! Waiting for the world to turn – and then we'll jump back on – is not God's invitation, but our own hesitation. We have already accepted God's invitation to keep turning the world towards God's kingdom...in the baptismal vows, in the gifts of the Eucharist. We wait only for the next moments when God calls us to serve – the moments that are ours to give to the turning.

Mary's waiting was different from our own. Yet even as she anticipated the birth of a child, her waiting was filled with praise for the God who looked past her weakness and lack of stature. Praise for the God whose justice would come into the world, whose mercy would last to the end of the ages. Not once does Mary question her role in God's kingdom on earth. Not once does she claim privilege or perfection. Not once does she say, "Wait a minute, God, I'm not quite ready." Her heart sings out for the day God brings. She is walking on the Holy Way with all of God's children – the very same Holy Way that God waits for each of us to walk.

We anticipate, in a very few days now, the joyous, breathtaking, tradition-rich *remembrance* of the coming of God into the world that began – just as our own lives began – with the birth of a baby. We mark the time when a young woman whose heart sang with God's love became part of the new creation. As we wait for that moment of blessed celebration with one another and with every member of Christ's body, the church, may we ponder in our hearts the words that Mary gave us: Though I am small, my God, my all, you work great things in me...

May we make those words our own. The world is about to turn!