

Third Sunday of Advent

December 16, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings :Psalm126; Luke 1: 39-56

“God Bless this Mess”

Grace and peace to you from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

A while back it was popular to see plaques, pillows and needlepoints that said, “God bless this mess.” I remember them each time I walk into my office that has been invaded by items, piles and papers for various church projects. “God bless this mess” and help me keep it all straight and remember where everything is and what it is for. Then there is the mess that is on my dining room table — the assembled gifts that need to be wrapped and mailed to Atlanta, the gifts that haven’t yet arrived, the last minute gifts that always seem to come up. “God bless this mess” and help me remember the meaning and joy of this Christmas season and the people I’m blessed to know and love. How about you? Have any messes in your home, office, lives? What exactly are we praying when we ask “God to bless this mess?” Do we want God to straighten out the mess or our abilities to deal with it? Are we asking to experience God presence in the messiness? Or, perhaps, I should be asking, “What might you be saying to me in this mess, Lord?” Elizabeth and Mary may have something to tell us about God’s place in the messiness of our lives.

Elizabeth and Zechariah had wanted a child all their lives. Now, in her old age, she has become pregnant. Just as they began this life-changing experience, her husband is suddenly mute. The town that once whispered about the shame of her barrenness now whisper of this strange turn of events. What a mess. Elizabeth goes into seclusion for five months. What fills her thoughts? Might she be balancing joy and anxiety? “At last she would have a child to care for...What would happen to this child if something happened to her? Motherhood is an exhausting, never-ending task. Young women struggle to keep up with the demands of parenting. Could she do it at her age? How would she manage? Was she up to it?”¹ God was in these miraculous circumstances but it was messy.

“If Elizabeth was in a mess, imagine the mess that Mary was in. Her mental state must have been even more jumbled. She, too, was unexpectedly pregnant.

Joseph was understandably confused, conflicted and upset. None of this had gone according to plan or even according to reasonable expectations. Mary had [likely] been looking forward to marriage and the chance to set up a household with Joseph, and then ... a baby. But now, everything was happening at once. [There was that strange visit from an angel,] and the stunning news about the identity of this baby. It was an outrageous time in her life. Events and emotions were swirling around her in a cloud of confusion. [God was in this incredible situation but] it was a mess!²

Today's gospel picks up the story as Mary travels to visit Elizabeth in the hill country. Did Mary go to escape the gossip and judgement of her neighbors? Gabriel had told Mary that her relative, Elizabeth, who was thought to be unable to bear children, was having a baby in her old age. Maybe, Mary wanted to see for herself if the angel's words were true. And, if true about Elizabeth, than perhaps what Gabriel said about the child she carried and being in God's favor was true, too. Maybe Mary just wanted to be with someone who might understand the messiness of an unexpected turn in life, that seemed to be of God but no less difficult. This teenage girl and this elder woman might be able to provide a safe place for one another, a safe place to lean into the magnificent messiness they found themselves in. Together they might find the space to breathe in God's promises of faithfulness, strength and salvation.

We don't know what words Mary used to greet her kinswoman, Elizabeth. We do know the sound of Mary's voice caused the baby in Elizabeth's womb to leap "Elizabeth knows! She takes one look at that frightened, youthful, unmarried kinswoman of hers and she knows that God is at work in her. She know her Lord is coming!"³ Already, the unborn John the Baptist was doing his job of announcing the coming Savior as he leapt for joy in his mother. Luke says Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. "That's Bible-talk for, God came to her. What she is about to say is not her own, but the words of God in her"⁴ spilling out. Elizabeth proclaims a blessing on Mary and the child she is carrying.

What did Mary think? She had "lived under the strain of believing God's promise of blessing while not feeling blessed. But then Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, confirmed God's blessing at work in her life"⁵ Mary is flooded with reassurance in the messiness of her life. Mary finds her voice. "Finally able to obey

Gabriel's command to rejoice; she suddenly burst out in joy; all the spiritual fireworks that had been hidden in her exploded, because now she knew: he was recognized, and she was recognized"⁶ Mary sings a song of praise and prophecy that has been treasured through centuries. It speaks of a divine revolution. It is sweet, incredible music, especially to those who are usually considered a mess — the lowly, the poor, the hungry. Mary sings of God's coming in the flesh of her son to proclaim God's love, which will turn the values of the sin-sick world upside down.

"Men are strangely quiet in Luke's first chapter. Zechariah is silenced. Joseph says nothing at all. What is the gospel writer up to here? In the hush, our gaze is drawn toward two women-relatives who rush to greet each other, females with wombs filled by miraculous cavorting babies, and spirits set afire by the living God... After the raucous reunion, after the cousins bump their rounded tummies, the women start to prophesy. They start to talk about how the world ought to be. They make claims about what God wants of us. Their talk is full of typical irrational stuff: you know, tyrants being thrown down; hungry people getting food. They protest social inequalities. They speak of a new order. That is the good news Luke has for us this Advent.... Luke wants us to catch sight of [God's] vision for this world sketched by [not one but two] pregnant prophets.⁷ Mary and Elizabeth recognize God's presence, God's love for us and the world even in the messiness of their lives. Luke asks if we will do the same.

In the unfolding Christmas story, Luke makes it very clear that God is at work among ordinary people. In this case, the elder wife of priest and teenage girl. Luke is also being clear that the movement and presence of God is not always simple, logical or easy. But Luke also wants us to know that when these women open themselves to the unexpected divine presence in the middle of all the mess⁸ they bless, sing and rejoice despite their fears, uneasiness and the unknowns AND we can, too.

There is little hope that my office or dining room table will become miraculously tidy and forever organize in the near future. Maybe you can say the same about the messes in which you find yourself. Mary and Elizabeth invite us to look for where God is in the messiness. For God IS there with assurance, insight and maybe even a song. "Remember, Jesus was born in a stable. And a stable is a really messy place. This new baby was out of place amid the straw, the spilled

grain, and all the smells and sounds of animals. But the mess is the message of Christmas. There is no stable, no place in our world that is too remote, too messy that God cannot be found there.”⁹ So, in Advent we again practice with Elizabeth and Mary. We practice looking and listening and believing that Emmanuel, “God-with-us,” is even in the messiness so that we, too, can join them in blessing and singing of the baffling but true ways that God’s love is present, working and will be victorious.

Linda M Alessandri 12/14/18

ENDNOTES

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1. Dr. Mickey Anders, ” This Magnificent Mess” as posted on <https://www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/luke-139-55-this-magnificent-mess-anders/>
 2. Ibid
 3. Dr. Kate Crawford, www.goodpreacher.com/backissuesread.php?file=10346
 4. Ibid
 5. Cited in Lectionary Homiletics Sermon Reviews, Joseph G. Donders, “An Angelic Order: Rejoice”, sermon in Jesus, The Way (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979) p. 23
 6. Ibid, p. 24.
 7. The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston ”Head of Household?” December 17, 2006 as posted on day1.org
 8. Ibid
 9. Dr. Mickey Anders, ” This Magnificent Mess” as posted on <https://www.sermonwriter.com/sermons/luke-139-55-this-magnificent-mess-anders/>