

Advent 4, Yr C
12-20-09
All Saints Church

In the name of the God who was, and is, and is to come. Amen.

"In those days Mary set out," writes Luke. What days are 'those days'? In the first three weeks of Advent, we have heard about the end of time, wars and rumors of wars, and about John the Baptist, all grown up and preaching about the coming of an adult Jesus, not about the arrival of a baby in a manger. But here, on the fourth Sunday of Advent, we are only days away from Christmas and the celebration of the birth of the Christ Child. So it seems fitting that we should hear something of the beginning of that story, too.

So here's what happened "in those days." There was a man named Zachariah who was a priest, and his wife was named Elizabeth. They were both old but they had never had any children. One day Zachariah was carrying out his priestly duties in the sanctuary, when an angel of God appeared to him; Zachariah was so scared he couldn't move, but the angel said, "Don't be afraid." Then the angel told him that his wife Elizabeth would bear a son, and that they should name him John, and that he would become a great man who would turn many people of Israel back to their God.

Zachariah was a little skeptical. "Do you expect me to believe this? You must be kidding!" he said. So the angel told him that because Zachariah wouldn't believe him, he would be unable to speak until the baby was born. And Zachariah had to use sign language with everyone. Pretty soon, Elizabeth became pregnant and went off by herself for five months.

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, the same angel who visited Zachariah, Gabriel was his name, came to visit a young girl named Mary, who was engaged to marry a man named Joseph. Gabriel greeted Mary, but she, like Zachariah before her, was scared of the visitor. But Gabriel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary." Then he told her that she would become pregnant and give birth to a son, whose name would be Jesus. After that, Gabriel told her that her cousin Elizabeth was also pregnant, even though she was very old. He said, "You see, nothing is impossible with God." And Mary said, "OK. Let it be."

Now we are caught up with what was happening "in those days."

So Mary went to visit Elizabeth and the two of them spent time together, discussing what had happened to them, and taking care of each other. They must have been scared - these were not ordinary things happening to them - angels didn't appear to just everyone, bringing messages from God. And very old women and young girls who weren't married didn't just 'get pregnant' - in fact, Mary could have been killed because of it. At the very least, Joseph could have said, "Hey, I'm not going to marry you now." And then there was the underlying fact that, as Jews, they were an occupied people - that is, the Romans were the rulers in their country, and things were not always safe for them.

But the angel had told both of them to not be afraid, so Elizabeth and Mary took care of each other, and comforted each other, not just because they were cousins, but also because they shared a bond that was even stronger than the bond between relatives - a bond that existed because they knew they had both been called by God to do something special. God had called them to bear new life - God's

life -- to bear God's hope - to bear God's peace to the world. And they did not have to wait alone for their surprising pregnancies to unfold; instead they were able to wait together, helping each other strengthen their faith in God, for whom nothing is impossible. And so, God's most radical involvement in history came to pass in community.

In this season of Advent, we in the church recognize that we wait in community for God's promises to unfold in our lives. Here, in community, we hold each other up when one of us needs encouragement or support. We help each other search for meaning, we rejoice with one another, we walk alongside each other. Just as Elizabeth must have listened to Mary, and helped her prepare for what was to come, we help each other work things out. We must not be afraid. Here, indeed, is Emmanuel - God with us - for we are not meant to go through either the tough times or the wonderful times alone. Both need to be shared.

The power of community is also the reason why baptisms now have such power -- so different from times past when a private-little-christening-on-Saturday-afternoon-when-no-one-was-around was the norm. Now, baptisms are meant to happen in smack in the middle of Sunday church, where we are all present as - and here I'll change my word from community to family - we are present as family to support the newly baptized, to rejoice with one another, to walk alongside one another, to remind ourselves of our own baptisms. We rejoice as family because each new baptism changes us as a family, and changes the world as well. We are different, the world is different, and our faith is different --- strengthened whenever even one person becomes a new part of the family.

Today, Hannah Leigh Gardner is being baptized into the household of God - another way to say she is becoming a new part of the family. She, of course, has already been a part of our family for several years, but today Hannah is choosing to be marked with a sign that says she is Christ's own forever. That mark, that sign of the cross on her forehead, will last forever, even if this whole church building should fall down and become a big pile of bricks and mortar.

And because that mark will last forever, Hannah's job, and our job, too, as Christ's own, is the same forever. This is the job: to be, like Mary, full of grace...to bring life to the world...to offer God's peace to everyone you meet...to care for everyone you meet - for the poor, the least, the lost and those who are unloved. This is a VERY important job! It will not always be easy. Sometimes it will even be scary. But that is when you rely on your family in Christ - to us who support you and love you - and you let us take care of you until you are ready to tackle the job again.

Most importantly, however, remember the angel's words: "Don't be afraid! Don't be afraid (Hannah)! For nothing is impossible with God." Wherever you live, wherever you go to school, wherever you work, wherever you raise your own family, God will be with you, and we will be with you, too.

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. Amen.