

Luke 1:39-45, 46-55

“And the World Is About to Turn”

Introduction

Emma, a little girl I knew in a previous church I served, was singing "Go Tell It on the Mountain," and she came to the end of the refrain and sang "that Jesus Christ was bored." Laura, her mother, said, "No, honey, it is that Jesus Christ was born, not bored." But Emma replied, very matter-of-factly, "No, Mom, he was bored; he was a baby in a barn with no toys."

Children have a way of seeing things from a different perspective.

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The fourth Sunday of Advent is called "Mary Sunday." It is the day we focus on Mary the mother of Jesus. We sing songs about Mary and the baby Jesus, the baby born in a barn without toys. We read the biblical accounts.

Mary, engaged to Joseph the carpenter, has been visited by the Angel Gabriel, and Gabriel has told her that she is pregnant and will bear the very son of God. Only in Mary's village of Nazareth pregnancy out of wedlock can mean being stoned for adultery. So for her protection Mary is sent to the home of her aunt Elizabeth in the hills of Judea. Elizabeth is also pregnant. She is carrying the child who will be grow up to be the forerunner of Jesus, John the Baptizer.

And according to the text, when Mary comes into the presence of Elizabeth, the child that Elizabeth is carrying leaps for joy. Even in the womb, John knows he is in the presence of the Messiah. And when Elizabeth shares that with Mary, Mary breaks into song.

It is a song of joy, not what we would expect from a poor unmarried girl. But it is also a song of reversal. God has knocked tyrants off their high horses, and pulled victims out of the mud. The starving poor are sat down to a banquet; and the callous rich are left out in the cold.

A reversal of the way the world has been and an affirmation that God is about to do something new. Have you noticed God has a way of making things happen, not in ways we expect, and yet in ways that work?

This has been an Advent with things not going exactly as we planned. The second Sunday was snowed out. We found ourselves having to combine the congregational meeting and Lessons and Carols. We had to combine two Wednesday night programs. Then today because of a death in a family, we found ourselves recruiting lighters of the Advent candle at the last minute. But that is how Christmas comes, not as we plan it, but how it needs to come.

II

One Advent when I was serving as a hospital chaplain, I was in charge of leading the Sunday service in the hospital chapel. I wanted to light candles in worship. After all, that is what you do in worship during Advent; you light candles. But it was a hospital; no open flames allowed. And I did not want to be known as the chaplain who caused a Code Red in the chapel on a Sunday morning.

So instead of lighting candles, I took four of those individual electric candles you put in windows and lined them up across the front of the chapel. At the beginning of the service, I went up and turned on the appropriate number of lights. It was not the way candles are supposed to be lit in worship during Advent. But it was the way it needed to be; the way it had to be.

And I realized that for most of the patients there and their families that was how the holiday season was going. Not the way they thought it was “supposed” to be. But the way it needed to be; the way it had to be.

Truth be told, rarely are things ever as people think they are supposed to be at Christmastime. And that is how Christmas comes, not as we expect.

Mary, a poor, teenage girl, engaged to a carpenter named Joseph, comes up pregnant. That is not the way it is supposed to be. An angel appears to Mary saying the child will be the Son of God. The Son of God on earth as a baby? The Son of God born in a stable? The Son of God with a birth announcement by angels to lowly shepherds in a field?

This is not how it is supposed to go for a king, a Messiah, the Savior of the world. But it is how it needed to be; the way it had to be.

III

Things do not always go the way we expect. Laurie Haller tells a story about a children’s Christmas Pageant. During the dress rehearsal the teacher used chalk to draw circles on the floor to mark where the angels were supposed to stand and crosses to mark the spots for the shepherds.

But the children had practiced with their regular clothes on. On the night of the pageant, the angels walked out with their robes and their beautiful gauze wings and stood on their circles. But their full robes and huge wings covered the crosses for the shepherds. So when the time came for the shepherds to find their places, they did not know where to go. The angels had taken up all the space.

One shepherd boy, extremely frustrated over the whole experience, shouted to his teacher at the side of the stage, "Because of all these angels, I cannot find my cross."

It is easy to let the majesty of the angels get in the way of everything else. After all, we would rather stay in Bethlehem looking at the angels. But Jesus did not stay in Bethlehem nor in Nazareth. And neither do we. The journey continues through Epiphany, into Lent and then all the way to the cross.

Because suffering is not optional for most people, the world being what it is. And suffering is not optional for most Christians, the gospel being what it is.

Mary gets that. And she realizes that the hardship she is facing is not just about her. What she is doing will bless all of humanity from that day forward.

Can we get that? That even if things are not the way we think they should be, our lives can still be a blessing to others? We may think we are not called to give birth to the Christ child, and yet we are called through the ways we live and move in the world. Our actions are used to make God's presence known to others.

There is a famous Christmas sermon by Martin Luther in which Luther notes how scripture says that when Mary's time came and they were nearing Bethlehem, Joseph sought room for them in the inn. But there was no room.

But Luther challenges that, saying yes there was room, all the rooms in the inn. There was just no one willing to give up theirs for a poor family in need of shelter.

And then Luther turns to his congregation and says, do not think, you would have done any better if you were there. I can hear you say, "Oh, we would have loved to take care of the Baby Jesus. We would have washed his diapers."

No you would not! Luther said. And if you think you would, why do you not do it for your neighbor in your midst, who is Christ among you?

Conclusion

We come to the end of a year in which things have happened for some of you that you did not want to happen, things that were not supposed to happen, but they did. And that is where Christmas comes.

It enters your lives not the way you think it is supposed to, but the way it needs to; the way it has to.

Bringing a message, Mary's message: God is in the midst of it, lifting those who are low, bringing wave after wave of mercy and turning things around, just as God has promised.

Maybe not how you think it is supposed to, but however it needs to, however it has to, may Christmas come to you this week. Amen.