

4th Sunday of Advent 2015 B Cycle

Story of gathering for Christmas:

A few evenings ago a small group of nine people work with youth in the community gathered for a Christmas party. After a while the men stayed in the front room talking and women disappeared. I found women in kitchen just standing there talking and truly enjoying being with one another. Women seem to be able to get into deeper conversations with each other than men. They are more comfortable entering into deeper personal intimacy discussions. That is why they may have a better insight into God. Have you ever noticed that?

Another instance of this is in the gospel story today. Mary travels sixty miles to visit her cousin, Elizabeth. The two of them meet, both literally filled with life (Mary is pregnant with Jesus, Elizabeth is expecting John the Baptist). We find them greeting each other in a joyful embrace. Both women are facing the challenge of child birth; both are in stressful situations (Mary expecting a child but not yet married; Elizabeth is well past the child bearing age).

Scripture is about to put on Mary's lips one of the most beautiful hymns of the early church, the Magnificat which begins, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit finds joy in God, my savior.

But Mary's words are preceded by simple but powerful words from Elizabeth in today's gospel.

First Elizabeth looks directly at Mary and says, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb". We find the source of their joy in that Mary has been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah who will redeem not only Israel but the whole world! Such joy causes John the Baptist to leap for joy in Elizabeth's womb. How could it be that to such a simple woman as Mary from an out of the way village like Nazareth give birth to the savior of the world? Only by the grace of God. Yes, Mary is indeed full of Grace and blessed by God.

But Elizabeth is not finished speaking. Elizabeth turns away from Mary and face the audience. She is now not talking to Mary. She is not speaking to Mary. She then says, "Blessed is she (point to Mary) who believed that the word spoken to her would be fulfilled ."

Elizabeth's words reminds us that Mary's role in salvation history is not only to be the Mother of God (blessed are you) , but that she is also blessed because she said YES to the Angel Gabriel, when he asked her to be the mother of God. Through her response to the request of

the angel, Mary became the first of her son's disciples and the model disciple for all ages to come.

Yes, Elizabeth is saying two things:

- 1. Blessed be Mary, the Mother of God.**
- 2. Blessed be Mary, who through her YES became the first disciple of Jesus and model for all of us.**

How do the words of these two women from scripture help us to prepare to celebrate the feast of the birth of the Lord?

First, it reminds us that if we are trying to find God and joy this season, we should not be looking among the rich and powerful, but among the everyday poor and lowly the humble and those of little account in the eyes of the world.

Today's first scripture reminds us of this when the prophet, Micah, says "You Bethlehem, too small to be among the clans of Judah, (compare to Highland Park) from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel." It was from this humble and lowly village of Bethlehem that the Savior of the world was to be born

Yes, if you are looking for God this Christmas, look not for the rich and famous. Is that not why we look to children who are truly the poor and lowly? I was thinking the other day, when President Obama looks for the presence of God this Christmas, will he find God in the Whitehouse oval office, the seat of world power and prestige, or will he find it gathered with his wife and daughters and a few close relatives and friends ? Yes, just as two pregnant women found joy in an out of the way place, so even in similar humble places will the rich and powerful will find joy this season.

That is why family is so important in this season. It does not matter how tattered our families and extended families are, they can be our entre into the presence of God this season.

The second way to find the joy and peace of this season is to seek God through helping those in need. Did not Mary come to help Elizabeth late in her pregnancy? In the exchange of care they experienced joy and peace. Maybe that is why is it that we make donations to charity and take tags off the giving tree in the back of church to assist those in need? It is not simply because they are in need, but it is a way we can find peace and meaning in our lives.

I was reminded of this when I got a call from one of the leaders of the Better Men Outreach. You may remember, this is a group of young men who play basketball and hold discussions every Sunday afternoon in our gym. He was calling to ask me if we had any freezer space for frozen turkeys. It seems that he had gotten 70 turkeys donated and was looking for a place to store them until they could distribute them. Well, as it ended up, he was able to get 400 turkeys donated!

Now this young adult comes from a very troubled family background. It will be a real challenge to find the joy of the Lord in his family this Christmas. He is out of work and could allow himself to just get mired in depression. But he also is seeking the Lord this season. He wishes to find the joy and peace promised with Christ's coming. Something deep inside him has told him, "Seek the Lord by reaching out to those in need."

It is because Jesus has told us to find Him by helping those in need that we find him present among those who are poor, and those who are poor in spirit. I am not sure this young man even believes in God, but somehow he knows that if we want the peace and joy in this season, we need to seek out and serve those who are in need.

Yes, Blessed are you, Mary, your YES shared intimately in Christ's family by being the Mother of God.

Oh yes, blessed is she, who is the first and most faithful of his disciples.

And blessed are WE, the adopted brothers and sisters of Christ. Blessed are we called to be disciples of the Lord.

And where will we find the peace and joy of the season?

Like Mary and Elizabeth, many of us will find peace and joy in our families, extended families and friends.

Like Mary and Elizabeth others of us will find Christ by lifting up the poor and lowly.

Go now, and celebrate the season

Go now, expect to find Jesus!