



December 2, 2007

Advent 1

Luke 1:39-45
The Interrupted Family
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The elders of the church have focused our strategic vision on building community. So it seems appropriate that we spend the four weeks of Advent thinking about what it means to be a church family at Christmas.

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They were quite a pair—Mary and Elizabeth. One was a young virgin, and thus, in her culture, it was too soon to consider her a woman. The other, Elizabeth, was old and without a child. According to her culture, it was too late for her to be a woman. But these two women were brought together into community by the one thing they had in common: their expectations were interrupted by God's expectations. And that left them expecting something new—babies.

Elizabeth, like every woman of her society, had wanted to be a mother. But after years of praying for a child, after probably getting used to not having a child, and after getting to an age when having a child was no longer a good idea, she became pregnant. I assure you that this was startling news to Elizabeth. Like most women in her situation, she probably had long ago found ways of coping with her longing for a child. After all, her husband had a good job as a priest, and that meant she was given an esteemed place in her society. When it was clear that a baby wasn't coming, her despair was at least comfortable. But then this! Now, in her old age she has to get used to receiving her heart's great desire. Elizabeth and her husband decide to name the child John, and he will prepare the way for the coming Savior.

Mary hoped for a child someday, when it would be appropriate and respectable. But not now. Not before she was married, not while she was still a virgin—as if anyone would still believe her on that.

God's sense of timing is almost always different than ours. Sometimes, as with Elizabeth, God moves too slowly. Sometimes, as with Mary, God moves too quickly. You know about this from your own life.

Some of you here today are Elizabeth. You have been waiting and praying for something for so long. Maybe you have even given up waiting for this something and found ways to make your despair comfortable. But at times, the old yearning reappears just often enough to remind you that you are not in control of your own life. Others of you are Mary. Your life has been blindsided by something you did not plan, something that changes everything. Clearly you are not in control either.

So on this first Sunday of Advent, let us remember Christmas is not an experience to be controlled. It is a season to pay attention to the *something* God alone can conceive in our lives. According to Luke, the Christmas story begins with interruptions. Elizabeth has her comfortable despair interrupted, and Mary has her hopes and dreams interrupted. I don't know if this December you are thinking, like Elizabeth, that all of your good Christmases are behind you, or if like Mary, you are still young enough to think that you get what you want. But I do know that these two women bid us to stop right now and remember that Christmas is not about getting what you want when you want it. It is about getting what God wants for us.

It is fascinating that after discovering she would give birth to the Messiah, the person with whom Mary most wants to spend time with is not Joseph, or her parents, but her relative Elizabeth whose life was also clearly out of control. This means that the very first church service, the first community of believers brought together by the presence of Christ, were two women with surprising pregnancies.

I have studied enough history to know that most of it is written by men about men. It is mostly about kings, warriors, bishops, male philosophers, and scientists who are making all the breakthroughs and developments in history. But when God intervenes with the single most influential breakthrough in history that can rehang heaven and earth, isn't it interesting that the only human agents are two pregnant women? I think that is because the process of pregnancy demonstrates something about how we all find our hope for renewal.

I am on thin ice here. I am not saying that women are created for the purpose of being pregnant. I am not saying that women ought to be or will be pregnant. Nor am I saying that I know anything about being pregnant. I'm just saying it is a wonderful metaphor for how we discover new life.

My daughter, Lyndsey, is seven months pregnant. As I watched this develop, I have been struck by how great a job her husband is doing. He hasn't been sick. He's kept his figure. He looks great. But there is no miracle occurring in his body. By contrast, everything in Lyndsey's life is changing by processes she can not manage. In fact, the pregnancy is now managing her.

That is exactly what happens when a miracle begins to develop within any of us. Just as cells miraculously divide to create organs, flesh, and bones, so does the Holy Spirit of God completely overtake all of our lives—male and female—creating new life.

The new life God creates in you may not look like the life you had planned. It may take you away from a place where you want to stay, or it may call you to stay in a place you want to leave. It may give you gifts, passions, and dreams you never expected. It may not be easy because it could break your heart over the things that break God's heart. Don't be surprised if you don't understand it. You're not in control. You're not supposed to be. You're supposed to simply receive it, and wait and watch while *something* develops.

So the most important Christmas present you can give this year is giving up the very notion of "My Life." We are all tempted to cherish an image of "My Life." These images look a bit different. It may be centered around family, career, or a particular lifestyle, but we all have a clear idea of "My Life." It's what we think about more than anything else. "My Life" is at the root of most of our frustrations, and it is the reason we do so much damage to relationships because someone is always in the way of getting "My Life" just right. As long as we have this image of "My Life" before us, we are either constantly straining to achieve it or despairing at losing it. Christmas claims that it is not your life. It belongs to God. And God is not nearly done creating it. There are more sacred interruptions to be conceived. There is *something* more.

The Renaissance artists loved to depict this scene of Mary and Elizabeth coming together. Most of their paintings of it are called "The Visitation." Typically, Elizabeth is presented old and frail and in the shadow of Mary who is vibrant and full of life. Often the two women are portrayed with one hand on the other woman's pregnant stomach and the other hand in the air, giving praise to God. Sometimes they are depicted whispering, as if they are enjoying a secret about *something* no one else outside of their little community could possibly understand.

These are portraits of the very first church—two gathered together in the name of Jesus Christ the Savior. As the church family began, so does it continue. We may dress up pretty well on Sunday mornings, but we do not gather as a people who have life by the tail and are in perfect control of our dreams. We gather by the hope that God is not nearly done with us, that Jesus Christ will come to us as well, and that there is *something* more in a salvation that never stops unfolding.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, we are told that the child within her—John, leaped for joy to be so near his Savior in Mary's womb. As with old Elizabeth, as you focus these weeks on drawing near to the coming Savior, *something* will leap up within you. Maybe it is something like an old hope that has come back to life or something that has come sooner than you were expecting. Maybe it is something that makes you restless, overwhelmed, but also joyful. That *something* is preparing the way to more life than you know. It leaps for joy because God is still at work.

It may happen in worship or during a candlelit Vesper service. It may happen as you watch a children's pageant and see how tenderly a six-year-old Mary holds her baby. It may happen as you stay up late staring into the fire or at the silently falling snow. It may happen as the words to an old carol pour out of the radio, and to your surprise, you can't stop crying about the hopes and fears of all the years being met in Christ.

You have less than four weeks. Don't miss it. Don't distract yourself with busy illusions of controlling Christmas. Advent is a season to watch and wait until something within your soul leaps up to salvation.

Benediction. *God is not done with your life. Christmas returns every year to remind us that there is always something more. Amen.*