

December 16, 2018 • Second Sunday of Advent

“The Light of This Baby” – SHINE LIGHT! Sermon Series

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris



Luke 1:39-45

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

By this Third Sunday, we're half-way through the Advent season. In the early church, Advent was observed like a little Lent. It was a time of fasting and long hours of prayer, with an emphasis on repentance. We've done the First Sunday and spent time with the signs in the sun, moon, and stars. We've done the Second Sunday and spent time with John the Baptist and the prophets out in the wilderness.

By the Third Sunday, we're ready for a change of mood!

Traditionally, this Third Sunday of Advent is Mary's Sunday. We rejoice with her at the news of this birth and light the pink candle on our Advent wreath, the candle of Mary, the candle of our joy.

But notice that once again, the story unfolds in a place far from the center of things or places of power. The headlines the world focus on the big and powerful people—corporate execs, leaders of great nations, but to find the real action in the gospel stories of Luke we've got to elsewhere, out to the edges, where lowly ordinary people live. Today we find ourselves far even from Nazareth, itself a nowhere place where Mary lived, out in the hill country of Judea in the home of her cousin, Elizabeth. And there, out in the wilderness, the voice of God is heard again, not from a wild somewhat crazy looking prophet wearing a cloak of camel's hair, eating locusts and wild honey. This time the voice of God announces the birth of two babies.

And it is there, in their lives, that God's story is unfolding.

This morning's story from Luke's Gospel is a beautiful story of what it means for us to trust that God is with us, and that God finds wondrous ways of shining light in the darkness, now in the lives of two cousins, one old, one young. Old Elizabeth, remember, has just learned that she is pregnant with a boy who is to be called "John," meaning "God is gracious," John who will prepare the way of the Lord. And then, lo and behold, her young cousin, Mary, is pregnant, too, she with a son who will be the Messiah.

Elizabeth and Mary had much in common. They were faithful. They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord. Their pregnancies were pretty miraculous, to say the least. The fact that Mary immediately journeyed to Elizabeth and Zechariah's home after Gabriel's visit, tells us that they had a close relationship. The journey from Nazareth to the hill country of Judea was some 80-100 miles, probably a 3-4 days trip. Mary made the trip quickly; perhaps to confirm the angel's message. That's not so different from what we do when something dramatic happens in our lives. We long to seek the company of those to whom we are closest.

When Mary arrived, as she entered the house, Elizabeth heard her greeting and was overcome by God's presence. The Scriptures say that she was filled with the Holy Spirit. She cries out with a loud voice: "Blessed among women are you, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what had been spoken to her by the Lord."

A baby will be born. Just as the angel had said to her. "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you will bear a son and you will name him Jesus." "Jesus," the Greek form of the common Hebrew name "Joshua," derived from the word *yasha'*, 'meaning the one who will save.' When the angel Gabriel told her that a special child would be born to her, she sang a song that begins with the words: "My soul magnifies, praises, the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." For the birth of this baby signals the birth of hope and the coming of new light into the world.

God—the great God of all creation, the God of all time and all space, the God in whom is no beginning and no ending, the God beyond human imagining and telling---this great God, for our sake and for our salvation, is indeed doing a new thing. And God's new thing is more than an idea, more than a proclamation. God doesn't simply announce to humankind:

“OK, I’m going to bring salvation to you and to the whole earth. I want you to really think outside the box with me now and imagine how this world could be more just, more whole, more beautiful...”

God does so much more in choosing to become flesh, to become one of us. The great all-powerful, all-wise, all-loving God, wanting to be seen, wanting to be known. God opens a door and shines a light and invites us to look and see. Maybe God knew that the light of love had to shine so brightly in one little face so that the rest of us would remember just how very much God loves each of us and loves this whole world.

On Friday last week, as part of our Preschool Christmas Celebration, the Holy Family enters, walking up the center aisle and taking their place here in front around the manger, just like we do at our Christmas Eve family service. This year, the Holy Family was played by our own Dane and Sarah Rold, Dane carrying baby Cavan accompanied by his big brother, Dominic. It’s a magical moment. Something seems to come over the whole crowd, adults and children alike, as the very precious ordinariness of it all is infused with a new light. A baby is born. A baby—ordinary, miraculous. A baby—“God’s opinion that the world should go on,” as Carl Sandburg put it. A baby, connecting all time—past, present, and future. A baby, connecting us all to one another.

Now let me just add that Dane and Sarah were great, but baby Cavan stole the show. As soon as they gently laid him in the manger...Cavan, aka the Baby Jesus, sat right up, faced the entire audience, smiled and opened his arms wide as if he understood perfectly the role he’d been asked to play. There were more than a few folks dabbing their eyes...

You see, a baby is where the light gets in. It’s as if God sneaks up on us, melting our hearts with this gift of a baby. Breaking open our defenses and our objections, giving our minds a moment’s rest with the gift of love in the Christ Child. God shining light into the carefully defended recesses of our hearts, disarming our self-protecting fabrications with a far greater truth. God choosing to come to us for our salvation, our healing, our peace.

And in the twinkling of an eye, justice becomes love, stranger becomes family. And in this baby, all the other babies in this world instantly become part of our own family. Even all those babies we’ll never meet—the babies in war-ravaged Yemen, the babies born at the border, the babies born on city streets...are as precious to us now as the baby born in Bethlehem, cradled in a manger because there was no room for them at the inn.

The amazing, life-changing news is that the coming of Christ is not simply about light--it is about light in the darkness. It is about light pushing back the darkness, light transforming the darkness by its luminous power. Christ comes as light coming into the darkness of our lives and of this world to cast out fear and to bring forth hope and new life. This is the light that is strong enough to show the way to peace amidst violence and war. This is the light that can show the way to healing in every place of discord and brokenness. This is the light that can show the way to hope amidst sadness and despair. This is the light of Christ—the light of peace, healing and hope.

For love, God becomes incarnate in a baby. And that baby is where the light gets in.

Now, every time we celebrate a birth, every time we name a baby, every time we baptize a baby, we look upon that great miracle and remember that nothing is impossible with God. And we are called to respond, to become light-bearers in this world though we may not know just when, or how, or for whom...

Unto us a son is born. Unto us a child is given.

And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Prince of Peace.

Amen.