

Advent 4 C
Micah 5:2-5a
Psalm 80:1-7
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-55

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Grace to you and peace in Jesus' name. Amen.

Q: How many Anglicans or Catholics does it take to change a light bulb?

A: None. They always use candles.

Q: How many TV evangelists does it take to change a light bulb?

A: One. But for the message of light to continue, send in your donation today.

Q: How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb?

A: We read that we are to so fear and love God that we cannot by our own effort or understanding comprehend the replacement of an electromagnetic photon source. It is, rather by faith, *not* by our efforts (effected toward the failed worldly incandescence), that we truly see, and that our own works cannot fully justify us in the presence of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Of course, it is still dark. (In other words: change?)

These are some old jokes that we have to laugh at it, at least a little bit, because we recognize how hard it can be to deal with change. God is always up to something new in our lives and when we recognize it, examples like Mary and Elizabeth can help us find our way.

The intersection of these two women's lives, Elizabeth in her old age and Mary in her youth, remind us that whatever we encounter in life God is right beside us. In fact, God is usually the one who initiates a new thing and it's remarkable to realize that God wants us to be part of it.

The first time around when God created people, as the creation story describes, it was pretty much a one sided act; a lump of dirt, a breath of air and God sculpted the first person. In Luke's story however, we see that God is looking for *partners* to bring grace, love, and peace into the world; timeless gifts that are offered to all whether you are in your old age like Elizabeth or just starting out in life like Mary.

Brilliantly, Luke brings these two women together in his storytelling as a means to demonstrate the richness and breadth of God's plan. Elizabeth was well beyond the childbearing years when she became pregnant. All of her longing and

desire to have a family was left unrealized into her old age. She and Zachariah had given up all hope, resigned to be childless. She lived in a time when we could say that Israel felt resigned to the way things were. Roman values, politics and way of life were so different than that of the Jewish people and there didn't seem to be any room to negotiate. We might think of Elizabeth as representing the Israelite people who were deeply longing, and very uncertain that change would ever come.

Mary too, might be seen as representing the Israelite people, but this time embodying the side of a long and great history that refused to ever give up. In her youthfulness she personifies the future and the changes that will come. The changes God was implementing were not going to come about by government or laws or policies or soldiers or even science, but through relationship and partnership with people. Her pregnancy reminds us that new beginnings, deep and meaningful change comes at the expense of great personal labor and difficulty. In other words, yes, change is hard.

God likes to interrupt us, sometimes when it may feel most inappropriate. But then again, maybe that's just the most efficient means to get our attention, we who are so consumed and distracted by many, many things. There's all kinds of stories in the Bible of God interrupting well laid plans: burning bushes, an encounter with a woman at a well, miraculous catches of fish, prophet consuming whales, or of course an empty tomb. All out of the ordinary stories designed to push us off balance and grab our attention.

This story of Elizabeth and Mary invites us to dream of possibility alongside of God and to dare to join in what God is up to! Mary had accepted God's invitation saying, "Let it be according to your Word;" she set aside her questions, her own agenda, her reputation, dignity and will in favor of a future over which she had no control and little understanding of what God was up to. But, she trusted. And within her was planted a seed of understanding that what was going to happen was not for her benefit alone, but for the whole of creation.

In the midst of a very unique situation, a beautiful and wonder-filled story, Mary sings a song of justice, a song of how God was implementing renewal. The proud would learn humility, the powerful and lowly made equal again, the hungry nourished, and the rich would learn to live with enough. Mary understood that she and her people were safe in God's plans. From that place of trust she becomes part of God's welcome especially for those who were as yet unaware: the Gentiles, the blind, lepers, the poor, slaves, foreigners, women, children, lost, forsaken, and forgotten.

As God's people today, in singing Mary's song, we join in ushering change into the world, not for our own benefit, but for all. We are part of a long lineage of

god-workers who are called to set aside our own interests and the longings of the world in favor of the great changes God has set in motion. We don't just sit around and wait for God to accomplish it, rather we are joining an active movement that dares to believe and hope in a future as Mary describes.

This is why we still gather for worship, why we still look for ways to be kind, to love and forgive. Today we share in a holy meal and we trust that God hears our need and prayers for healing. We share our pain and our longings because there is much to do to bring about a new humanity.

We too, from a place of belonging and grace, must boldly sing the song of change. We are well aware of the despised and marginalized, the defeated and denied. May God's song in us sing of affirmation, welcome, fair trade and care for the environment, May our bodies swell with the love and labor of justice, feeding the poor, and restraining our insatiable desires so there is enough for all. May our hearts be filled with hope for a new day to come when we, with God's guidance will realize we are living the promises of God in this very moment.

And may the Holy Spirit give us the courage, hands, feet and voice to sing as God births the new creation — the new community in Christ.

Amen.