

4 Advent/Year B

Dec 24, 2023

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Canticle 15; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

Rev Julie Platson, St Peter's by the Sea Episcopal Church

Opening Prayer: (based on Luke 1: 26-38)

Most High God, for you nothing is impossible. Through a poor young woman in a small town you gave birth to your realm of endless glory. By your Holy Spirit, fill us with new life and hope and overshadow us with your power and grace so that we, like Mary, might be your servants, bearing witness to the promise of your Word; through Jesus Christ, who is coming to reign. *Amen.* (from the Office of Theology and Worship, Presbyterian Church)

It's hard to believe, but here we are celebrating the 4th Sunday of Advent...with only a few hours to go until Christmas Eve and Christmas Day Services. If you are like so many others during this holiday season lamenting that there's so much to do, and not enough time...this is the day when we hear the loudest cries from people stressing over how many presents are left to buy, and how many cards are still left to write, and how on earth one will get the house clean and all the food prepared for the big holiday meal – tonight or tomorrow!...Even the preparation and planning related to all the special services and meetings at the church can turn our focus away from the true “reason for the season”...and the real purpose for our rejoicing...

Today's gospel reading has a way of helping us refocus our attention once again, on what is truly important this holiday season...and what it is we are rejoicing in...or I should say... “who”...the one whom Mary proclaims in her song today... *“My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.”*

I draw much comfort, strength and inspiration in today's gospel reading, and the story about the angel's visitation to Mary. In the midst of uncertainty and wondering aloud with all of her questions at the visitation of the angel Gabriel...she was able to focus on the message, the Good News being proclaimed about the child she would bring into the world...about the Son of God...who will be named Jesus. She could have argued with the angel for a long time...but instead, she allowed the compelling announcement to draw her in to the mystery of it all...and instead of lamenting and brushing it aside as words of nonsense and unbelief...she said yes to this new thing God was about to do...

In the few verses that follow today's gospel reading, we hear these words of what she did next after the visitation from the angel:

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.”

And then Mary continues in this scripture passage with her song of praise as we hear them in the words of our beloved canticle today.

In the midst of uncertainty and not fully comprehending what was to come, or How could it be?...she said YES! And in the sharing and affirmation of the angel Gabriel’s message for her in her encounter with Elizabeth, Mary responded with a song of praise and joy....

Might we do the same this year?

With so much uncertainty, suffering, and hopelessness swirling all around us, might we dare to say yes to all that God is calling us to be and do to bring about his kingdom of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love to fulfillment here on earth, as in heaven...

On this 4th Sunday of Advent...just hours before the Christmas celebrations are set to begin...I invite you to pause this morning, remember the words of the good news proclaimed by the angel Gabriel in today’s readings, recall Mary’s song of praise, and refocus your attention once again, on what is truly important this holiday season... the One who is to come, once again...Jesus...Emmanuel...God is with us...God will always be with us...

**Closing Prayer/Hymn: Mary Heard the Angel’s Message (Voices Found Hymnal) #4
(vs 1 &2)**

1 Mary heard the angel’s message:
Greetings, Mary, favored one!
Do not fear, for God is with you;
You will one day bear God’s Son.
Filled with questions, filled with wonder,
She proclaimed her faith in God:
May it be as you have spoken;
I’m the servant of the Lord!

2 When she heard her cousin’s greeting,
Mary’s heart was filled with joy,
So she sang of God’s great blessing
Promised in her baby boy:
God has looked on me with favor,
So I sing this song of praise.
*God has worked, the proud to scatter...
Humble, hungry ones to raise.*