

Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 23, 2018
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Puzzles and Mysteries

Micah 5:2-5a
Psalm 80:1-17
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

“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 leapt 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 leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’”

And Mary said,
‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.’

And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

It was a few weeks ago that Denise e-mailed out a new preaching Rota, and I saw where I was on the schedule. As is my practice, I immediately looked up the lectionary passages for the day to find a prophecy by Micah, of a ruler for Israel to arise from Bethlehem and bring peace to the people; a Psalm that prays for the restoration of Israel; an explanation to the Hebrews of how Christ ended the need for blood sacrifice; and this brief story from Luke's Gospel, of Mary's visit to her kinswoman Elizabeth.

I'll admit to feeling relieved that the Magnificat—Mary's eloquent response to the blessing that God has bestowed upon her and her radical prophetic vision of the Kingdom of God that will upend the known social order—was an optional part of the lesson.

Instead, it was our song of praise, and I hope you felt the power of the words.

It's one of those passages that simultaneously excites and intimidates me as a lay preacher. The language is beautiful and joyous, the message an awe-filled song of praise for God. But what could I possibly say about this Gospel text that hasn't been said before, and more authoritatively, by ordained clergy with seminary degrees? How could I preach a message of social justice—of turning the world upside down—without treading too close to the line of politics in the pulpit?

And somehow it just didn't feel right on the fourth Sunday of Advent—and, this year, the last day of a truncated Advent season before Christmas Eve—to stir things up. It seemed more appropriate to foster peace and preparation and contemplation. And that turned out to be the direction I found myself led by the Spirit as I waited for guidance and inspiration.

So what I want to do this morning is to look at this brief passage from Luke—and a little more broadly at his version of the Nativity story, as laid out in the first chapter and a half of his Gospel—in terms of puzzles and mysteries.

For those who don't know, my day job is in the intelligence community. Puzzles, in my weekday world, are questions that have an answer, even if that answer is unknown to us. The puzzles we find in Luke are not unknowable: someone at the time knew the answers to all of the questions that we now may experience as puzzles. Let's examine a couple of them.

When we meet Mary, as Gabriel comes to proclaim God's favor to her, we are told that she is engaged to a man named Joseph. And months later, when they reach Bethlehem, Mary is still identified as his betrothed. So when DID they get married? It seems to me that Joseph would have married her as soon as he could, given the baby on the way, but no. Clearly, one purpose of the story is to fulfill prophecies about the Messiah, but that leaves open the puzzle of when and where the wedding took place. Was it celebratory, or quiet? Private, or a typical wedding feast for family and friends?

Turning more specifically to today's passage, where is Mary living when she decides to visit Elizabeth? Just after the Magnificat, Luke tells us that "Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home." Where exactly is that home? When Mary set out in haste to visit her relatives, is that really her own decision? Has her family, or Joseph, sent her up to the hill country to get her away from curious eyes? How does she travel? What was the journey like? If she got there when Elizabeth was six months pregnant and stays for three months, then she takes off just before John's birth. Why?

Then there's the question of whether Jesus is really born in a stable and laid down in swaddling clothes in a manger, one of the most beloved images in our traditional Christmas story and hymns. I can recommend an excellent scholarly article by British theologian and Anglican priest

Ian Paul that delves into this puzzle, explaining clearly and succinctly, through translation issues and cultural knowledge, why this image is almost certainly inaccurate. Rather than repeat the entire argument, all I'll do now is to put a question to you: given the tribal nature of ancient Hebrew culture, when Joseph goes to Bethlehem, the hometown of his ancestors, wouldn't he and Mary stay with family members?

None of these are new questions—they've been asked by scholars and ordinary Christians for a long time. And I don't raise them as a game or a frivolous exercise, but there really wouldn't be anything wrong with that. I suggest to you that anything that moves us to engage more deeply with Scripture—to read, ponder, imagine, explore, and, yes, to question—is a good thing. There are time-honored practices like *lectio divina*, as well as newer ways of devotions, such as guided meditations, that help us deepen our relationship with the Word. On that note, here's a shameless plug: we're going to begin a weekly, evening Bible study program next month that will examine Biblical stories as literature—another technique to draw us into the Scriptures.

And examining these puzzles can lead us to deeper questions—to what we call mysteries. I define these as truths that are unknowable, questions to which we will never know the full answers, at least not in our lives on Earth. Although scholars and theologians and church leaders have debated some of them for centuries; although the church has, foolishly, divided and re-divided over some of them; although humankind has, tragically, fought wars over them, they are ultimately beyond our human understanding.

From Luke's nativity account, for example, what exactly does it mean when Gabriel tells Mary that “the power of the Most High will overshadow you” and she will bear a son? What does this suggest to us about the nature of that son, both human and divine? How does John, still an infant in his mother's womb, recognize the presence of God's son and leap with joy? How can Elizabeth immediately and correctly interpret the movement of her child as being that leap of joy? Why does God choose the path of incarnation in human form, with all the joy and pain of human life, as the way of our salvation? Although Luke doesn't use the word “trinity,” we hear of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, raising the mystery of the relationship of the three persons of God. And pondering these questions, as Mary pondered in her heart the words of the shepherds about her newborn son, we ultimately come to even bigger mysteries: Why did God create us? Why does God continue to love us? Why will we be given the gift of salvation and eternal life?

I did promise you big, unknowable mysteries, after all. It doesn't matter that we don't and can't answer them. What matters is the exercise of thinking about them, turning them over in our minds, contemplating the deep love that lies behind them—this brings us closer to God's love for us. This is prayer and worship, just as much as our liturgy here today. So I hope that on this last day of Advent you will find a time of rest and peace and stillness, a time of Sabbath, to remember that God is in these mysteries, that Light is coming again into the world, bringing the peace that passes all understanding. Amen

https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/once-more-jesus-was-not-born-in-a-stable/?fbclid=IwAR2pqEYGmjR_edhGLLb3bmBi-r3ktMZXjl0QrcdKoz0H1LatK7Oi4oAvnLY