

Trinity Episcopal Church
Lawrence, Kansas
Sermon for December 20, 2009
The Fourth Sunday of Advent ~ Year C
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

There is a quality about this season that prompts the heart to express itself. For me, the chief expression of the heart is praise. *Praise* means to heartily express a high opinion or admiration of someone or something. For people of God, the praise of God has always been the foremost thing. God is worthy to be praised and should be praised above all else! The Hebrew word, "hallelujah" literally means "praise Yahweh." Its variations appear more than 150 times in the Old Testament and are echoed in the New. Those ancient people knew then what people of faith know is still true today, Praise is a wonderful thing!

As we stand here in this Advent, there are signs of wonder and glory all around us. We can identify with Mary and Elizabeth. They, too, were living in a world that knew suffering and injustice. They, too, had lived their lives in the belief that God would send the anointed one to bring healing and redemption. Now, they had received signs, incredible, unmistakable signs that the anointed one was on his way. And they were to be instruments of his coming. The child Mary would bear was to be the Messiah. And, Elizabeth's son, who would be called John, would go before the Messiah and announce his coming. How awesome it must have been for them. Two women of low estate were chosen by God to be important in the plan to bring salvation. How could they do anything but sing praises? Praise truly is a wonderful thing!

Praise is wonderful because in order to give praise God, I must first be released from my own needs.

Getting our needs met is one thing in which this generation has excelled. And, to be fair, there has to be a certain amount of concern in relationships for the meeting of each other's needs. However, it is easy for the issue of getting needs met to overshadow the impulse to meet the needs of the other. And, when that happens, it is difficult for a relationship to survive and for a person to be healthy. Some people I have met have so sublimated their own needs in relationships that they have to be described as self-destructive.

One of the greatest experiences of freedom is to be so focused on that which is other than me that my own needs are no longer significant. For there to be something so incredibly good and wonderful that I am set free from my preoccupation with my own needs is rare indeed. To find that before which I can lay my burdens down and no longer be encumbered by them is perhaps the greatest feeling of liberation.

When I stand before the God who created me, who redeems me, and who sustains me not because of my merits or my needs but simply because it is the highest concern of God's heart, I am set free. Praise is born of that freedom. And, interestingly enough, even at those moments when my needs are foremost on my mind, if I will begin to praise God, I discover that my chains are once again broken. The event in which Mary and Elizabeth would play a role was one of cosmic and political significance. In their belief and in their moment of praise, their needs held no power over them.

Praise is a wonderful thing because in order to give God praise, I must first be so captivated by the divine glory that I am compelled to respond.

Praise isn't praise if it isn't expressed. Praise is in the voice that bursts forth in song or in acclamation

in response to something incredibly good and praiseworthy. It is an almost spontaneous response.

Occasionally we experience the glory of another person or of some natural phenomenon and when we do we find ourselves almost transported into another realm for awhile. I remember a cold December day several years ago when I was standing outside waiting for Gay to pick me up at my church. I heard a strange sound around the corner in the church's courtyard and upon investigation discovered that the sound was made by hundreds of robins, which had flown in with the cold front and had stopped for a brief interval in their migration. The ground was literally black and the leafless trees above were filled with chirping birds. For some period of time - seconds, minutes, hours, who knows - I was totally lost in the wonder and glory of that experience. I had no thought for myself. I only wanted to express delight in what was to me a rare moment. Time stood still. Words of praise found their way from my heart to my lips.

Martin Luther believed three miracles occurred in the Christmas event: God became human, a virgin conceived, and Mary believed. Luther considered the greatest miracle to be Mary's belief. Perhaps it was the greatest miracle. But if we can learn anything from Mary's belief and Mary's song, it is that when we are in the presence of the glory of God, praise is the unavoidable response.

Praise is a wonderful thing because praise is not required to improve God.

While God desires our praise and delights in it, God is not improved by it. Rather, *we* are improved by it! I have a secret theory that I will share with you this morning. I believe that praise is a necessary element in any life that is mentally and physically healthy. Maybe it's not the only thing, but people who can't or won't express praise for God or anything else are usually not well people.

As we learn to discipline ourselves to daily find occasions to praise God, we discover that our relationship with God grows stronger. That adds to our lives in untold ways and we become healthier and happier. People around us notice the difference.

Praise is a wonderful thing because praise does not claim any of God's glory.

Rather, the satisfaction is in the acknowledgement that the glory does not belong to me. Those who come to that conclusion usually discover that life then takes on a new glory...a glory not its own, but the reflection of God's glory as God is enthroned upon the praises of God's people.

Randall J. VanderMey writes in his book, *God Talk: The Triteness and Truth in Christian Cliches*, "Some people react to good tidings or moments of reprieve by saying "Hallelujah" with genuine joy. From a solidly Christian perspective, they are momentarily joining the eternal choir, inhabiting heaven under the cloak of time."

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with great favor on the lowliness of his servant." Mary's song. Your song. My song. When we see God's glory, we sing it. And, we sing it not alone, but with choirs of God's people on earth and in heaven.

This morning, we have an extra reason to rejoice. Shawna and Major Chapman have come to give thanks for the birth of their first child, Lucy. Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see. Shawna and Major know that. They understand that their chief responsibility as parents will be to guide

the formation of the message of Lucy's soul. They understand that the best way to send a message is to wrap it in a person. We understand that, too. When we carry out our Lord's command to baptize, we remember our role in helping form the message. It is cause for rejoicing, for Shawna and Major, for all of us. In time, this soul will sing Mary's song. In time, he will find out about rejoicing. In time. Beyond our time. Beyond all time.