

Christ Episcopal Church

2 Emerson Road

East Norwalk, Connecticut 06855

The Fourth Sunday of Advent (C)

December 23, 2018

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

“Golly”

DRAFT

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.

Be present with us as we consider the lowliness of your handmaiden, Mary, and

how the Lord chose her to be the God bearer for all of us. Amen.

A young girl who had found herself somewhat overwhelmed by all the hustle and bustle and confusion of the commercial holiday season was overheard praying, “And forgive us our Christmases, as we forgive those who Christmas against us.”

Perhaps you also are somewhat overwhelmed by last minute shopping, attending to details, worried if you have forgotten some special someone on your Christmas list. Well, for you we have the message that hope began on Christmas, but it did not end on Christmas. Do not give up

hope, for Christ will again come among us, and indeed he is already here.

Sam Levenson tells a wonderful story about the birth of his first child. The first night home the baby would not stop crying. His wife frantically flipped through the pages of Dr. Spock to find out why babies cry and what to do about it. Since Spock's book is rather long, the baby cried a long time. Grandma was in the house, but since she had not read the books on childrearing, she was not consulted. The baby continued to cry. Finally, Grandma could be silent no longer. "Put down the book," she told her children, "and pick up the baby." Good

advice. Put down the book and pick up the baby. Spend time with your children, and your grandchildren, particularly at Christmastime. We have the mistaken notion that good parents give their children lots of things. Wrong. In a survey done of fifteen thousand schoolchildren the question was asked, “What do you think makes a happy family?” When the kids answered, they didn't list a big house, fancy cars, or new video games as the source of happiness. The most frequently given answer was “doing things together.” Notice the joy with which Mary and Elizabeth greeted the news of their pregnancies.

The two women get together for their own private support group. Elizabeth has had to live in a very quiet household for six months, as her husband, the priest Zechariah, had been rendered speechless by the angel because Zechariah would not believe he and his aging wife could have a child after years of barrenness. Then suddenly out of the blue, her younger kinswoman, Mary, shows up, bubbling over at the wonderful news that the angel had given her, that she would bear God's Son who would be the savior of the world. Mary wasn't married, so to whom could she share this great good news. Her betrothal to

Joseph was a bit rocky to say the least; Joseph was considering how to ‘put Mary away quietly’ as Matthew’s gospel puts it. He just assumed Mary was pregnant by another man, and even though a kindly man, he wasn’t about to marry a non-virgin. So, one might expect their relationship was less than cheery at that point. Then Mary just up and decided to travel to the Judean hill country to visit her older kinswoman Elizabeth. Since Elizabeth had by then been pregnant for six months, it is possible, maybe likely, that Mary knew that amazingly good news about Elizabeth, and Mary thought, ‘Aha, here is the person with

whom I could share my own very delightful news.’ Mary too was probably experiencing the ‘silent treatment’ of her beloved Joseph who was confused by her pregnancy, to say the least. Thus, it was a natural, it seems, that the two women would revel in being together. Mary, being only a few days pregnant, would be the one who could make that journey into the hill country of Israel. I guess we could know more if they had texting back then and some had saved their back and forth. But it seems they were left to their own mettle, and the miracle of the Holy Spirit, that would get them together at this critically important time to be a comfort

for each other. And once Elizabeth delivered her baby, Mary would begin to show her pregnancy in her third month and could reappear in Bethlehem without causing such a stir. People would just assume something had happened to her up in the hills. Of course, at about the same time, the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and had advised him that the miraculous pregnancy was a part of a Grand Plan of God and not to put Mary away as he had been planning but to take her as his wife.

Mary and Elizabeth could share their hopes and dreams for at least three months while they were together. Elizabeth's son,

John the Baptist, would become the forerunner of Christ, the announcer that God's favor had finally come to earth in the form of the Messiah who takes away the sins of the world. God had chosen these two kinswomen to be the bearers of children who would change the world forever, John the Baptist and Jesus. The wombs of these two women, and indeed their very genes, would be the chosen means and vessels for God's greatest miracles, miracles greater than the rainbow or the parting of the Red Sea waters. Mary and Elizabeth would be intimately responsible for carrying and raising two male children who would speak

with undeniable truth what God has planned for all of us to this very day. The Savior of the world would be the one in whom we put our trust for this life and for all eternity, life everlasting.

Now, fast forward to how this story came down to us: How did we hear these details that presumably only Elizabeth and Mary would know?

In my mind's eye I can see Mary thirty years later in that upper room telling the trembling disciples this most miraculous of miraculous pregnancy stories she had personally experienced. Her son had been crucified, tortured to death in a most

despicable way reserved for only the worst of the bad—hung on a tree. She herself had to make sense of all that had happened to her firstborn son on bloody Calvary hill.

And she offered this otherworldly story of her very young life in order to do that. This incredible story gave the disciples the courage to stick it out until their Lord reappeared to them, bidding them, “Do not be afraid” as he showed them his nail-punctured hands and his spear-pierced side. The victory they needed was to overcome their momentary disbelief following the Master’s untimely death at the hands of the Roman executioners. Mary’s spontaneous

story of great joy shed a light of a new hope-filled perspective for all of them. Mary recalled them back to the beginning, to the moment of Incarnation, when the Word became flesh. Without knowing it, Mary was preparing the disciples for the return of their Lord from stone-cold death, probably an even greater miracle than his birth from a virgin mother.

If the season of Advent has gotten you down, have heart. Hear the shouts of Elizabeth and Mary at the coming of their Lord and our Lord. He will never forsake us or leave us. He will be with us through thick and thin. He will lift the darkness of

our darkest hour. And he will miraculously fill our cold hearts with warm joy once again.

Christ our Lord is miraculously risen. We will celebrate his miraculous birth momentarily. And he will soon miraculously appear again one day, this second time in great power to raise the living and the dead. Christ's birth was only the beginning. The rest will continue to amaze us as miracles come to our lives daily between now and his second coming. We can bless the Lord. Our souls can magnify the Lord. The Mighty One has done great

things for us, just as God did for Elizabeth and Jesus' mother Mary.

Mary was given no guarantee, no guarantee, by the angel Gabriel, that this one-of-a-kind “experiment” of Incarnation would not be life sacrificing for her, if not for her new offspring. So, her lack of hesitation once she heard what the purpose of this divine message would be is even more reason why God had deemed Mary “favored”. Her life would never be the same again; it would be unlike any other mother then or now; she would become the “bearer of God”, “theotokos”, as the Orthodox creed

of the church acknowledges, a subtle difference from being the “mother of God” that some Catholic traditions assume. God “was” already, so Mary was not actually forming God anew in her womb, but she was the vehicle God used to bring God’s Son to life; Mary provided fully half of the chromosomal material of her son Jesus, but God had provided the rest in some miraculous way, perhaps ‘tweaking’ one of Mary’s X-sex chromosomes to become a Y-chromosome. However, the complexity of producing a Y-chromosome from an X-sex chromosome, or whatever its source, would be a miracle far greater by many orders of

magnitude than Jesus' first miracle of changing water into wine, a very simple hydroxy-hydrocarbon, yet requiring the conversion of an oxygen atom into a carbon atom. But DNA of chromosomes is far, far more complex than ethanol. So, the miracle Jesus does later at Cana of Galilee would be almost trivial relative to the miracle that God the Father had done at his Son's miraculous birth.

We use the word, "Incarnation" a bit flippantly during this time of year, like we might say "sweeten my coffee" or "stir my tea", but Incarnation is a profoundly mysterious event, so far beyond human

understanding that we cannot even begin to comprehend what the angel had proposed to this very young girl, Mary, the insignificant maiden of the insignificant town of Nazareth of Galilee in the insignificant Roman-controlled colony of Israel. Of more than two thousand still extant writings of rabbis in the first century, not one ever mentioned Nazareth, it was such an inconsequential town, at that time perhaps with a few hundred residents at most. Today its population is near 60,000, but in the first century it was a nothing place where nothing ever happened. No one of any significance had ever heralded from Nazareth, no king,

no prince, no general. Nazareth was as close to a non-entity as any town could be. And a young female from such a place would have absolutely no standing in society anywhere in that time.

Yet our God is a God of the inconsequential. God will show God's greatest power here in racially impure first century Galilee by using the least and the last, to show they are not the lost. God will use little Mary to demonstrate that God has no view of human stature or standing that in any way correlates to what society would deem worthy of honor or praise. God did not use a famous artisan, God did not

promote a well-known family, except for Joseph's distant lineage from King David-- Mary herself apparently hailed from the tribe of Levi, not that of kingly Judah, not related to ancient King David. Mary was in a word, nothing, but God profoundly favored her. God saw in Mary something that perhaps no one else had ever seen in Mary. Mary would be chosen to be the God-bearer, the Christ Child bearer, the mother of Jesus.

Christian writer Fred Buechner said that the angel's wings probably stirred at the announcement being made to young Mary not because they were beating with the

harmony of celestial bodies but because no heavenly being could bear the possibility that the one receiving the glad tidings would not accept these tidings on face value, not questioning their import but only the seemingly impossible likelihood of a virgin who would become pregnant without knowing a man intimately.

In this way we learn we can never think we are too lowly for God to do mighty miracles through us. God usually if not always chooses the most unlikely, the least expected, the “lowest on the totem pole” to be God’s most important followers and leaders. God chose young Mary, a young

unknown virgin in an insignificant town in an inconsequential country, to be the one to birth the One who reigns on high; whose throne is above all thrones. And if we are seen with favor by God, a new miracle never before experienced may be already on the way through us as it was through Mary.

Be not afraid. God will visit you too and give you a special gift to use to spread the Good News to all people. Our task is only to say “Yes” to the Creator of heaven and earth as God remakes us in God’s own image to serve his one and only Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Description: God chose young Mary, a young unknown virgin in an insignificant town in an inconsequential country, to be the one to birth the One who reigns on high; whose throne is above all thrones. And if we ourselves are seen with favor by God, a new miracle never before experienced may be already on the way through us as it was through Mary.

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Tags: God, Mary, young, unknown, virgin,
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inconsequential, country, Israel, one, birth,
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carbon, oxygen, John, Baptist, Joseph,
Elizabeth, child, old, children, happy,
family, grandchildren, video, games, gifts,
Dr. Spock, Incarnation, Christmas, Advent,
pregnant, experiment

St. John's Episcopal Church

61 Broad Street

Elizabeth, New Jersey 07201

The Fourth Sunday of Advent (C):

December 21, 2003

A Homily by the Rev. Joe Parrish

The Holy Gospel according to

Luke 1:39-49

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 Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor 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.

Mighty God, Lord of Lords, you have made your power known in the incarnation of your Son Jesus Christ in his mother Mary. Come and be with us again and give us the capacity to overcome doubt as you did to Mother Mary. Amen.

It was not at all likely that young Mary would be chosen to be the bearer of God. She was after all not a descendant of David; her betrothed Joseph was. Mary the unknown was too young to become a mother

many would argue--twelve is just too immature, even fifteen. And then to have that little pregnant girl travel safely alone over seventy miles on foot across some of the most treacherous badlands of Israel between Nazareth and the Judean hill country south of Jerusalem to Zechariah's home simply adds to the intense drama of the moment following the announcement the angel had made to her that she was to become pregnant by means of the Holy Spirit.

Mary arrives unannounced and uninvited at the doorstep of her much older relative Elizabeth, who by the way was pregnant

way beyond her years to bear a child. And, as the story goes, Elizabeth's baby leaped for joy in her womb when he sensed his Lord had come nearby. The number of impossibilities and extreme improbabilities in this story is enormous: a virgin is pregnant; traveling alone as a long young woman without mishap through the haunt of thieves and bandits is unlikely in the extreme; and that an unborn baby has extrasensory perception to know the whereabouts and divinity of someone else is just not kosher. This story in the Gospel according to Luke is highly problematic for a borderline skeptic--it is just too

improbable; their meager faith could be destroyed.

It seems that once the miracle thing gets going, nothing will stop it--otherwise, why all these improbable things following the angel's announcement of the impossible, a virgin birth? Elizabeth takes the uprising of her unborn child to be adequate notice that the Messiah was as near as young Mary's womb. The blatant show of faith by Elizabeth is astonishing. For Mary, the angel's appearance was needed; but for Elizabeth, a quivering in her midsection was all she required for her exclamation to Mary of great exuberance: "Blessed are you

among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

Then there is the beginning of the Magnificat, that song of Mary, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” There are two words here that are problematic: “soul” is not really an Old Testament concept—it is a New Testament idea, “soul”. We moderns from our ancient Greek heritage take “soul” in stride as being that eternal and very personal human nature that can be saved by God through faith in God’s Son Jesus Christ. But to have our soul “magnify” anything is really stretching the bounds of believability. Lenses magnify things.

Braggarts magnify themselves. Levers can magnify the forces exerted upon them. But souls are not things we think of as having magnification properties. To make God bigger than God already is quite a stretch when you think about it. I know we read a lot into this statement of Mary; but on the surface of it, what she says is very controversial, as much so as the rest of the story. The language is not normal human dialogue. Many scholars say it was just a reworking of the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 when Hannah learned she had finally become pregnant by her husband Elkanah. But Hannah was neither as old as

Elizabeth nor as young as Mary--she would bear another five children after little Sam was born. It had simply taken her an unconventionally long time to become pregnant that eventually required the intervention of God. The latter, God's role in the pregnancy, is what is so similar between Old Testament Hannah and New Testament Elizabeth and Mary.

But imagine how such a story about the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth could have been transmitted in the form we now read it. Luke was not there in Zechariah's house. Peter and the other disciples were not there either. The story

says only Mary and old Elizabeth were present. And after John the Baptist appears on the scene many years later, we hear no longer any mention of Elizabeth. Elizabeth had presumably died of old age long before John's cry in the wilderness and maybe even long before anyone conceived of copying down or memorizing any birth narrative of Jesus. So today's gospel story's repository is solely Mary. Mary herself had to tell the events directly or indirectly to the writer of Luke's gospel, or, as many scholars say, Luke simply made it all up, concocted all of it. One cannot prove that concoction did not occur, nor can one prove that it did occur. I

will offer as good an explanation as that by saying I can conceive of this story being told by Mary in the upper room as the disciples cowered from fear of the Jewish authorities after Jesus' crucifixion. It was a story, perhaps a eulogy of her son Jesus. She was perturbed about his death on the cross. But she just could not get it out of her head how the whole thing had started--first an angel had appeared to her to announce the impossible pregnancy; and then shortly thereafter the six month old fetus of John the Baptist in Elizabeth's womb miraculously knew the story just as the angel had told it, without having had any contact with the

angel and certainly without having any form of mature communication ability--John was a six month old fetus, for heaven's sake. I can hear Mary trying to piece the whole pregnancy thing together with the disciples listening so intently that you could hear the drop of a pin. It was a glimmer of hope in a sea of hopelessness following Jesus' death on the cross. No one expected Jesus would die such a young death. And absolutely no one expected he would overcome the grave. But Mother Mary's story gave them all some sense of comfort that totally miraculous things were part and parcel of Jesus' amazing life from his very

conception. And this amazing story of Mother Mary at least briefly took the disciples' minds off the horrors of Jesus' excruciating death by suffocation.

Maybe this Advent and Christmas season has brought you another of those episodes of hopelessness and loneliness--the world says spend, spend, spend, and you don't have a dime more to do that with. The world says jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle bells, and you think, bah humbug, Christmas is only for kids, it is not for grownups. And your very soul seems to be shriveling up and ready to die, if it hasn't already. The war may have gotten you down. The stock market may

have gotten you down. The lack of employment may have gotten you down. Terrorism may have gotten you down. Something may have gotten you down. And now you have to suddenly rally spiritually and conceive again in your skeptical heart that a virgin bore a baby. It is just too much.

It reminds me of the story told about Leningrad, St. Petersburg, as it was about to be overrun by the Nazi army in World War II. All of the most precious artwork were removed from Leningrad's great Hermitage museum and put on a train going out of the city just before the German army arrived at the city gates. In the following days there

was great suffering and hunger among everyone in Leningrad as all their supply routes were completely cut off by Hitler's army. But the curator of the Hermitage museum got the bright idea of opening its once pristine halls to the nearly starving Russian troops to try to get their minds briefly off the impossibility of the defense of their city. The curator would take groups of soldiers on guided tours down the museum's once magnificent hallways and pause before each empty picture frame and explain in elaborate detail just what once had been the outstanding picture in that frame. And he would bring a tiny ray of hope into the

combatants fearful and battle wearied hearts as he got them to imagine the return of all these great treasures of art after they had won an impossible victory against an overpowering military force. And they did win.

I can see Mary in that upper room telling to the trembling disciples this miraculous of miraculous pregnancy stories she had personally experienced. She herself had to make sense of all that had happened to her firstborn son at bloody Calvary hill. And she offered this otherworldly story of her very young life in order to do that. And this incredible story gave the disciples the

courage to stick it out until their Lord reappeared to them, bidding them, “Do not be afraid” as he showed them his punctured hands and his pierced side. The victory they needed was to overcome their momentary disbelief following the Master’s untimely death at the hands of the Roman executioners. Mary’s spontaneous story of great joy shed a light of a new hope-filled perspective for all of them. The disciples were being prepared for the return of their Lord from death, an even greater miracle than his birth from a virgin mother.

So if the season of Advent has gotten you down, have heart. Hear the shouts of

Elizabeth and Mary at the coming of their Lord and our Lord. He will never forsake us or leave us. He will be with us through thick and thin. He will lift the darkness of our darkest hour. And he will miraculously fill our cold hearts with warm joy once again.

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now and his second coming. We can bless the Lord. Our souls can magnify the Lord. The Mighty One has done great things for us, just as God did for Elizabeth and Jesus' mother Mary. Thanks be to God. Amen.