

Fourth Sunday of Advent, C
Micah 5:2-5a
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-55 (Message version)

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We've almost come to the Longest Night – December 21st, the winter solstice -- and we can feel it closing in. We wake up in the dark, we drive home in the dark, and sometimes the night can seem more threatening than restful.

This is the time of year when ancient pagan religions in tune with nature's cycles would observe certain rituals to make merry in the darkness. It's little wonder that Christians eventually came to celebrate the Savior's birth in this deep dark of winter, with candles and late night worship reflecting the light of life born for all.

Our postmodern culture does its best to beat back the darkness with multicolored light displays and cheerful events and buying, buying, buying --- but many people of faith have learned there is value in *leaning into* the darkness. Because leaning into the darkness can be a way to lay hold of hope. This week some congregations are offering what they call "Blue Christmas" services, that is, services of gentle healing to acknowledge how difficult the holidays can be for people who are grieving or lonely or struggling. At Blue Christmas worship, it's okay to cry. God is near. This week at Covenant Presbyterian on the east side, they are holding a "Longest Night" service outdoors on Tuesday evening. If that sounds cold and wet and miserable, it's meant to be -- this service is about standing in solidarity with neighbors who have no shelter, inspiring allies to use their power and privilege to see that everyone has what they need to live.

The people of God are good at finding light in shadowy places—for this is why Christ came, to illuminate human life, to illuminate the whole creation so people can recognize one another as family, and urgently act to set all people free.

For encouragement, this morning we are blessed with the luminous story of the Visitation – when Mary traveled to visit her relative Elizabeth and they shared that joyful moment of greeting. Both women recognized the babies they carried were part of God's work to heal all creation. Elizabeth's baby boy would grow up to be John the Baptist. The angel promised Mary's child would be the Son of God Most High – though exactly what that meant could not be guessed at yet. Still when they met, Elizabeth's baby kicked up a storm, an internal nudge to tell his mother: *Here's the One we've been waiting for! At last God is bringing new birth to everyone.*

I love the way artists portray this wonderful meeting. My favorite is a rather homey painting where Mary has paused at the foot of some steps leading up to the door of a house. There's something hesitant about Mary's posture, hand on the banister, hanging back a bit, young and uncertain. Mary is very aware of her shame – she knows how people will shun an unmarried pregnant girl -- but it becomes clear that Mary will receive a welcome here. Because Elizabeth, heavy with her own child, has appeared at the top of the steps, her wrinkled face beaming with delight and her arms stretched out wide to offer the warmest hug and invite Mary in to her kitchen table for a long talk, some tears, and some laughter too. Elizabeth is much older, well past her childbearing years, and she herself knows the burden of reproductive shame. All these years she's been called a barren woman, failing at the one task required of a good wife.

But God has turned both Mary and Elizabeth's lives upside down – in the best way. God has turned their shame into honor. God has turned their sorrow into rejoicing. Their fear into courage. Their judgment into blessing. In fact, God's whole mission is to turn this whole world upside down in the most life-affirming way possible.

The message is right there in Mary's song: *God is scattering the proud and arrogant, and bringing down the powerful from their thrones ... God is lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things while the rich, who already have enough, are sent away empty.*

Very interestingly, some scholars think it was originally Elizabeth who sang this song -- the Greek text is not clear . It does make sense. Mary was so very young, she'd seen so little of the world, but Elizabeth had years and years of sad experience with the pressures that crush people down. Elizabeth knew from experience how the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. How those in power will deliberately ignore those with no clout. How ordinary people struggle to keep safe housing and feed their families and tend to their sick. How vulnerable people, those fallen ill in mind or body, are just left to fend for themselves. How hatred between races or ethnic groups spreads poison everywhere. Elizabeth had seen so much that her heart was breaking over all these injustices. She was ready for a change – and you know what? So are we. We are ready for a change. Reach for those who abuse power to be cast down. Ready for the lowly to be lifted up.

And here's the good news: God's promise is for broken-hearted people. When our hearts are breaking, when we feel the night closing in, for ourselves and others, this is exactly when God can work God's best work in us. God brings strength to the weak. God provides food to the hungry. God will never fail to help those who trust in God's

presence and give their energy to God's new kin-dom of love and peace and equity. God will never fail to help.

In Christ, God brings what broken-hearted people need: mercy, forgiveness, and compassion... honor and strength... guidance and insight and direction... inspiration, confidence and courage... and the will to share, a generous spirit, a tenacious commitment to bring good to everyone, not just ourselves. Christ brings us close to God, and God is always working in us, in all this earth, to redeem what is lost and broken. To tear down oppression, and lift up what was brought low.

This is the new reality, the kin-dom of God, you and I were baptized into. This is what our community of faith stands for, it's where our faith and convictions are always leading us. We are not there yet, but today we sing with Mary and Elizabeth, we sing with joy about what can be, what will be, about the goodness God is bringing, and with them we give ourselves over to this mission again.

Mary and Elizabeth can be our model. When their lives were upended, they came together to remind each other of what God was up to. They formed a holy friendship, a small community of faith, that kept them true to the outlandish promises God had spoken. I can imagine kitchen-table conversations when Mary shared her misgivings. Maybe Mary would be wondering, *Did I just imagine all that about the angel? Was it just a crazy dream?* And Elizabeth would say, *No my dear, it seems crazy but it's real. God is doing great things in you, even in you. God is with us, and there's something even more beautiful yet to come.*

In our own congregation we have these same conversations. As we close in on the Longest Night, it's easy to be overcome by doubt and fear. As we live our own upended lives, progressing two steps forward and one step back in this pandemic, progressing forward and back as we press against the forces of hate and greed, we can begin to doubt and worry. This is the time to *lean into* our God-given holy friendships. This is the time to *lean into* the life of this faith community where we celebrate God's promises and hold onto Christ's mission and hope.

In classic paintings, Mary and Elizabeth are often pictured literally *leaning into* each other. They are embracing, their arms draped around each other, their heads leaning in to touch. There's often a halo around each woman's head, and as they lean together the haloes mingle, sometimes encircling their entire bodies with light. Their holy friendship exudes light, it illuminates the shadows. Their friendship is not afraid of the dark, because the Mighty One has already done great things for them, and they trust in what is yet to come.

We do the same, *leaning into* the holy friendships of faith. Like Mary and Elizabeth, all of us are waiting for God's promise to be birthed through us. In these short days and long nights, our losses and grief may return to haunt us, loneliness may bruise our hearts, and fears may speak loudly.... But into this darkness we also carry great beauty, because of God's sure and certain promise.

As Christians we carry the kind of beauty that is able to reveal itself in the waiting time. The beauty of Christ's Spirit alive within us, growing in its influence as we allow it. The beauty of drawing strength from each other. The beauty of reaching out in compassion. The beauty of feeling human pain and deeply aching for every person to have what they need. There is beauty in that sincere longing. God can work with that.

The waiting time is necessary, for Mary and Elizabeth and for us. As much as we would love to perform an instant fix for the woundedness of this world, that kind of healing is beyond us. But it is not beyond God. It is not beyond God.

God's healing, saving power is gestating in each of us, right now, and we will only see it fully birthed when the labor pains of God's creation have come and gone. But in the meantime we have our mission to pursue. We follow this beautiful model of two women in unexpected turmoil, embracing each other and sharing hope that has been passed down through the generations, right to us, this very day. And we remember the promise: *The Almighty God does great things in you, even you.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.