

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Do you have all your Christmas shopping done? Is everything wrapped and under the tree? Are you ready for Christmas? Whether we have our shopping done or not, most of us are ready to celebrate, not only from a religious standpoint but culturally as well. But we are not quite there yet. Today is the last Sunday in Advent, Thursday is Christmas Eve day and the real start of the Christmas season, so this last week of Advent is going to be short! But since today we are still in Advent, you have some breathing space, a little more calm, a bit more time to reflect and prepare to celebrate Christ's first coming, to think about his second coming.

Now in our readings this morning we have a something a little different from our time of preparation, from the frantic pace of getting ready. Our gospel has the expectant Elizabeth and Mary, our responsive reading is a continuation of the gospel, and we have a passage from the prophet Micah, and perhaps they will help us come to the brink of fulfillment, the brink of hope.

Micah was written during a time of Assyrian domination, with what we might call oracles of woe in the first four chapters. But here in the fifth chapter we have a resounding note of hope for the coming leader, the promise of deliverance, one who will like a shepherd feed his flock, restore security, and bring peace "to the ends of the earth." Here we have a vision of restoration, righteousness, justice and mercy. This new ruler will be of humble origins, from one of the little or lesser clans of Judah, from the insignificant will come one who will do great things in the strength of the Lord. New life will sprout and spring forth from a people who have brought destruction upon themselves. The new day comes with the arrival of the anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ. And what will be required of us but to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.

The message is the most relevant message we can hear in a world of warfare, clashes over economic gain and policy, religious differences, violence in the name of religion, and power struggles in countries, companies, even families, a world where people are gunned down in classroom, theaters, shopping malls and even churches. Violence simmers and rages on every continent, open warfare in the Middle East, parts of Africa, riots, intimidation and violence in the Holy Land itself and in the adjacent areas, places where Christ trod while he was on earth. The message of peace has not been fully heard, the message that wars will not be ended by more war, that we cannot fight our way into the coming reign of peace is not heard, understood, or assimilated by people on this earth.

But in Advent, a season of hope and expectation, we wait, we pray, we look for the one whose message of peace will be heard and lived to end of the earth.

We come now to our gospel reading which takes two expectant mothers to the edge of birth, to the edge of hope. Mary has heard and received the angel's message that she is to be the mother of Jesus, while Elizabeth old and barren, is six months pregnant with the baby John who will be the voice crying in the wilderness. Jesus'

story fits within the framework of covenant and redemption, as he fulfills Jewish history and prophecy. Born in Bethlehem, and through him God will show mercy. But his story begins through the faithfulness and the faith of the two women mentioned in our gospel, Elizabeth and Mary. Elizabeth makes that first profession of faith referring to Jesus as "my Lord," while Mary has simply stated to the angel who came to her "Let it be with me according to your word."

Here in our gospel I see two women who are dancing, dancing on the edge of hope. Dancing with the fear that accompanies both pregnancy and childbirth, especially two thousand years ago. Hope touched by fear but also expectation that God will fulfill what he has ordained. I see Mary and Elizabeth each as a source of strength to the other, not knowing what the future will bring, but hearing and seeing the promise growing within each other. John who will baptize many including Jesus. Jesus who will save his people from their sins, already acknowledged by Elizabeth as "Lord." There is joy and real anticipation as both women await the birth of their sons.

In our responsive reading, Mary proclaims what has come to be known as the "Magnificat," from the first word of the Latin translation, one of the most beautiful and poetic pieces in all of scripture. Mary's song reaches back to Hannah, and it reaches forward to everyone, every person, every congregation, every nation that has been and is waiting for God's promised redemption, waiting for God's justice, mercy and deliverance. The trust of Mary nearly stops our hearts, the beauty and yet simplicity of her words, the prayer of Hannah in 1 Samuel, which exalts the lowly, and brings down the proud. Mary believes that she is singled out as no one ever before or since for a moment in the divine story where God joins her story to the story of creation, in Mary and through Mary, God risks it all for the sake of love. And the Almighty has already come, the Magnificat is in the past tense, salvation has come, the hungry are filled with good things, the rich have been sent away empty. God's favor, past, present, and future is upon believers, and now my brothers and sisters, now is the time to magnify the Lord!

AMEN