

Homily for December 21, 2003
Fourth Sunday of Advent

By Father Charles Bowes

Luke 1: 39-45

God surprises us in unexpected ways.

There is electricity in a crowd waiting in line, all in a huddle, anxious for doors to be opened.

This is true at a movie or sports event or on the first day of a sale. They can hardly wait; they feel that they are on the threshold of something marvelous. That's where we are today – on the threshold of something marvelous. The scripture readings prepare us for the upcoming feast, giving us glimpses into the mysteries we will be celebrating. They bring together the major themes of the first three Sundays of Advent: Promise, Repentance, Transformation and Joy – all coming about in unexpected ways, unheralded, unannounced, surprising. We now stand on the threshold, eager for the doors to be opened so that we can step inside and enjoy the marvels prepared for us on the feast of Christmas.

Today's scripture readings open the door a crack, and we are amazed at how ordinary, how commonplace everything is inside. We see Bethlehem, an unsophisticated little village that is but a stone's throw from the thriving capital, Jerusalem. Though remembered as the birthplace of the great King David, Bethlehem really never made a name for itself in any other way. To the side we see a young, pregnant woman

hastening to help an older relative who is also with child. There is nothing extraordinary about this, is there?

But wait a minute. What is God up to? From this rugged backwater village will come a ruler even greater than David. A shepherd will be born here unlike any shepherd who tends flocks in the hills surrounding the simple dwellings. And something extraordinary occurs between these two women – one old, the other young. The lives within the sanctuaries of their wombs recognize each other. They are each amazed at what is going on in and around them. And yet it is all so ordinary, so commonplace, so day-to-day.

What makes God choose what is ordinary to carry the radiance of the divine? What makes God use what we would ordinarily miss to convey the holy? Might it be so that the glory is not given to the common vessel that holds it, but points to God where it belongs? Or might it be that we mistake what is loud and flashy for what is truly marvelous? Whatever the case, God's choice of the ordinary recounted in today's scripture readings encourages all of us. The mystery of the Incarnation, the enfleshment of God, comes to ordinary people living ordinary lives, doing ordinary things. All that's required is openness, a willingness to see, to listen.

Where in the past few days, in the ordinary give and take of our lives, have we seen the hand of God at work? Was it in the chance remark of a friend? How the evening sunlight played upon the window pane? A song heard in a fresh way? Whatever, wherever there is a deepening of insight, a newness coming forth in human life, there is the enfleshment of God; there is the Spirit at work. You might ask: "Lord, what do you wish me to recall of the past few days?" And then just see whatever comes to mind. Where did you see the hand of God at work recently? Think about it for a moment in silence.

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