

Let Us Find Our Rest in Thee

Advent 4: Hope in Our Hearts

by

The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

December 19, 2021

Luke 1:39-45

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Micah 5:2-5a

²But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. ³Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; ⁵and he shall be the one of peace. If the Assyrians come into our land and tread upon our soil, we will raise against them seven shepherds and eight installed as rulers.

The first two chapters of Luke's gospel are so chock full of dramatic moments that we often overlook this more ordinary visit of two pregnant women getting together to compare notes. The high drama of Chapter One began with the Angel Gabriel showing up at Elizabeth's husband's place of work and terrifying Zechariah with a promise that – despite his old age – he was going to have baby John. So stunned by the news that his child *would turn many people to the Lord their God*, the priest is rendered mute throughout Elizabeth's pregnancy. Then Gabriel wings his way over to Mary, and proclaiming her blessed, promises she will give birth to the Son of God – which will be a shock to Joseph since the wedding invitations haven't yet been sent.

Soon enough the sky will fill with angels over a field of shepherds and their flock, singing *Glory to God and peace on earth*, but just now we have this glimpse inside an ordinary home, a couple of women relatives, greeting one another in their tender time of pregnancy, when little feet flutter and kick from the inside. There's not an angel in sight. There's no mention of fear. There's not a mute priest or a befuddled fiancé in the picture. Today the gospel – no less extraordinary – settles into normal; it opens the door to a modest house in the hill country, and gives us a glimpse of two pregnant women talking about *What to Expect When You're Expecting*.

The artist whose prints have graced the covers of our bulletins during Advent, John August Swanson, died this past September. His work hangs in the Vatican, in museums in London, Paris, Chicago and New York, as well as numerous churches and educational institutions including a huge collection at Emory University. His renown at the end, and the fame of his artwork never belied his humble beginnings. He was the son of a Mexican mother who immigrated to the United States in 1928, fleeing violence and revolution. His father was Swedish, left his native Sweden in search of work, and arriving through Ellis Island, his name was changed from Sven August Svensson to John August Swanson. His father had a hard time supporting the family during the Great Depression and became largely absent. His mother, Magdalena,

became a gifted seamstress, found work and community in Los Angeles among Jewish tailors who had arrived fleeing anti-Semitic violence in Russia.

Nurtured by his mother's Mexican immigrant family, Swanson became a devout Catholic, and was influenced by the fearless advocacy of the Catholic Worker Movement for social justice. Along with Desmond Tutu, he was one of the first recipients of the Mother Teresa Award for Social Justice. The artwork of John August Swanson, as you have seen, influenced by the bright color palate of Latin American folk art and Russian iconography, depicts an intricately detailed view of faith and justice. He encountered the sacred texts of scripture as events in which every vulnerable living creature awakes to God's loving closeness and intimate involvement in the everyday. Swanson said of his art, which is always also a statement of faith: "I want to convey real life difficulties with optimism and generosity, and the small details of life are where the sacred reveals itself."¹

The small details of life are where the sacred reveals itself. That's what the gospel does in this quotidian picture of Mary's visit to Elizabeth's house. Luke has made us aware of their difficulties – Mary is an unwed teenaged mother to be, and Elizabeth is way too old to be having a baby. We already know they are bearing children who *will turn many people to the Lord* and their sons – both of them – will lose their lives doing it. But before all that high drama begins to unfold we are meant to know that God comes to us in the small details of life, the seemingly inconsequential moments, as we navigate our difficulties and find ourselves longing and hoping for a brighter tomorrow.

Biblical scholar and Pastor, Paul Duke, notes that after Mary consented to the news of her coming child, she had to do something

¹ John August Swanson taken from multiple articles found online after I read his obituary in *The New York Times*, September, 2021.

with it. In her going with haste to Elizabeth to share it, she was in fact confirming and deepening the truth of what Gabriel had said. Likening their encounter to the community of the church, he writes: “This visitation is the first gathering of the community of Jesus. It invites us to recall how much we need each other... Both of these women, impossibly pregnant, embody how improbable and how subversive the church can be. When life is hard, we companion each other; we are young and old together nurturing wisdom; we help one another; against all odds amid the challenges we face, we draw fresh courage from each other; and together we celebrate all that we share as bearers of the promise of Christ together. Like Elizabeth and Mary, we, the church, as different as we are from each other, we find ourselves “expecting” and rejoicing together.² When we face the difficulties and the grief that life invariably throws at us, we remind one another that together – in Christ – we have hope.

Ted Loder, was a long-time pastor of the First United Methodist Church in Germantown. He told a movingly honest story about how the hope of heaven makes a home in our hearts in these last days of Advent as we await the joy of Christmas. Three days before Christmas, he drove into downtown Philadelphia to have dinner with his daughter, who had dropped out of college to deal with some deep personal problems. During this same time, Loder's mother was dying, and his father was clinically depressed, and his own life was unraveling in deep ways, too. As he got out of his car there was a cold drizzle, and he headed up the street of row houses toward the restaurant where they were to meet. He came across a row house with the whole front window jammed with a manger scene. The figures were large and lit from the inside. Loder says he smiled and saluted the piety of this family who gave up half of their living room and all of their privacy to display this manger scene.

² Paul Simpson Duke, *Connections: Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Year C, Vol. 1, p. 61-63.

The dinner with his daughter left him still feeling very concerned for her. On his way back to his car, as he passed by that nativity in the row house window again, he stopped and noticed something he had not seen before. There it was: shepherds, wise men, angels and an assortment of animals all gathered around Mary and Joseph who were looking. . . actually, Loder writes, “just about where I was standing.” He stepped closer and looked in again. There was no manger, no infant, no baby Jesus inside the window! “In effect, the street was the manger,” he continues, “and I was standing in it.” That night, this row house was telling the old, familiar story a little differently. “This time those silent, lighted figures were looking expectantly out on the street for the Christ child, out on the street where the beasts are motorized now... and people like shepherds sleep on sidewalk grates, and people like Magi dish out food in soup kitchens, or work in movements or churches to change things so someday there might not be homeless people or hungry children or anxious parents.

Loder stood there with tears in his eyes. “I realized,” he said, “that just where I was standing, the Christmas miracle happens. In the street, where human traffic goes endlessly by, where men and women and children live and limp and play and cry and laugh and love and fight and worry and curse and praise and pray and die... just there Christmas keeps coming silently, insistently, mysteriously.” He walked back to his car, thinking about “a wild stable always being close at hand in this wild world, about the strange, saving birth taking place in unlikely places like Lombard Street” where he had been walking.

Then, Loder let the awe of that scene settle even closer to home. He thought about this saving birth taking place again in human exchanges in restaurants and row houses and soup kitchens where our hopes for each other and ourselves stumble over our limited power and yet by God’s power are – unexpectedly, miraculously somehow re-made. Loder concluded his reflection saying, “Jesus is born again and again, in a thousand times, a thousand miracles, a thousand daily

moments, and occasionally in the human heart. God close at hand. Always.”³

In a most ordinary kind of household occurrence, a typical moment between relatives both caught in a difficult and unexpected time Elizabeth said to Mary, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And lo and behold, that simple greeting assures us that wherever we are, and whatever daily dilemma we ourselves are facing, the Lord has come to us.

The hope of heaven makes a home in our hearts.

AMEN.

³ Ted Loder, *Tracks in the Straw*, Innisfree Press, Inc., 1985, pp. 12-17