

“Verily Good News” – Luke 1:39-55 – Advent 4 – Dec 24/06

What a wondrous scene of joy and rejoicing we are privileged to watch courtesy of Luke, as with breathless excitement Mary greets her cousin Elizabeth. The joy and excitement of the two women is palpable, and even the babies are moved to celebrate as they come together to share their great news. Great joy, with the stirring of new life in the womb. Wondrous awe, with the clear evidence of God at work in these happenings – Elizabeth in her old age, Mary as a young woman, both greeted by messengers of God with great news. Both women are clearly filled with joy and happiness for each other and for themselves.

It’s easy to share in their excitement, to relish with them the promise of new life. But there’s a twinge of worry as well, because there was little apparent reason for them to be so happy. They lived in difficult times in the Middle East, times that bore many characteristics familiar to today. Their land was occupied by the armies of a foreign and arrogant superpower. Trouble and strife rose up frequently in the struggles between the occupying forces and those who were variously described as terrorists or freedom fighters, rebels or resistance, murderers or minutemen, depending on who was doing the describing. It didn’t seem to be a particularly good time to bring a new baby into the world, a baby who could easily get caught in the ever-widening gap between the poor and the wealthy, the oppressed and the powerful, the downtrodden humble and the strutting proud. In the midst of the joy and excitement of a new baby, there was always the concern as to whether that baby would survive, and grow, and find fulfillment in life.

I think we recognize those concerns and dangers because they still exist today. Admittedly here in comfortable Vancouver the probability of a safe and successful birth is extremely high, largely due to superb health care facilities – yes, superb, especially compared to much of the rest of the world. Readily available medical attention, fresh clean water – well, normally! - nutritious food, warm clothing, safe and comfortable housing means that any baby born here has an excellent chance not only to live but to prosper and grow. Yes, there are exceptions, but the worst of the exceptions here are better than the best of what’s available to a huge proportion of the babies born into this world. Unfortunately places still abound in the world where children are born into extreme and eternally-trapping poverty, into slavery even, with dirty water and scraps of rotting food as the best of their banquets. No clothing except recycled rags; a dirt floor and sometimes a roof forms their nursery. Instead of soothing lullabies their sleep is punctuated with the sounds of bombs, the rattle of gunfire, doors being kicked in to the accompaniment of much shouting, the screaming of relatives being dragged off never to be seen or heard from again. That was the kind of world into which Mary’s and Elizabeth’s babies would be born. No sounds of gunfire, instead the clanking of swords and metal armour, but it was still a difficult place to deliver and raise a baby successfully to adulthood.

But even so, both women were filled with joy at the prospect of having a baby, and especially so at the clear indication of God’s hand at work in these births. Indeed they are both so filled with joy they cannot contain it, and both of them burst into song.

This is not the first time in the history of God’s actions that a woman has burst into song like Mary. Indeed, Mary’s words closely echo those of Hanna. You might remember Hanna – she was the woman who hid in the temple after closing time to pray that she might get pregnant, and the priest Eli thought she was drunk and went to throw her out, but when Hanna offered her son to God if she should be blessed by God with a son, he pronounced that she would indeed have such a son, and that son we know as Samuel. Other such incidents come to mind, such as Abraham and Sarah, and their son Isaac, as well as Manoah and his wife, and their son Samson.

Following on those traditions in which elderly couples were blessed by God with a first child we would expect Elizabeth to be the one to burst forth in song, as she fit that same profile. Even her son fits the profile, for her son John (the Baptist) also fit into the old traditions, becoming a key

prophetic figure. Sarah laughed, and named her son ‘Laughter (Isaac)’; Hanna sang, and we might well expect Elizabeth to sing also, as well she does.

The surprise, however, is that Mary, a young virgin, also burst into song, and as she does she signals that God is doing something new. God’s grace here is new, and surprising, and beyond understanding. God is not acting here with a minor change in the aged and barren – he is acting in a totally new and mysterious way, restarting His grace anew and afresh in the birth of this child.

And Mary’s song itself is also a surprise. She sings of justice, which is not surprising, but she sings of justice in the past tense, as though it has already happened. We might expect her to sing of justice to come, but she declares God as already having acted, having shown strength, scattered the proud, brought down the powerful, lifted the lowly, filled the hungry, and sent the rich away empty. But Mary is not confused – she is singing a declaration of faith, that God has acted, and in that starting to act lies the promise of fulfilling those actions.

We continue to sing Mary’s song. We affirm a new beginning of God’s justice in a new covenant in the birth of Jesus, a justice made clear in all the ministry of Jesus, a covenant sealed in his death and resurrection. Jesus himself declared in later life to the baby who jumped in Elizabeth’s womb that this justice was beginning to be fulfilled as the hungry were fed, the naked were clothed, the oppressed were freed. Jesus also declared in his death and resurrection that the promise of full justice to come was sealed, that upon his return in glory the lowly would be lifted, the proud made humble.

“What about in the meantime?”, you ask. Yes, in the meantime, while the process of bringing about justice is incomplete, there are still the proud, even among those who would label themselves with the name of Christ. There are still the rich and powerful, keeping others poor and oppressed through weapons of war, weapons of economic power, weapons of prejudice and hatred. There are still the hungry, the poor, the downtrodden, the oppressed, the powerless.

But there are also those who, filled with the Spirit as Elizabeth was, as Mary was, who are also engaged, silently and sometimes not-so-silently, in God’s act of bringing justice to the world. There are people who stand in the cold feeling embarrassed as they jingle bells to raise money to feed and clothe the hungry and the naked. There are many who sling boxes of food and bags of wheat and rice, who work long hours at low or no pay to put together food hampers. There are uncounted legions who cook, who serve, who visit, who stop to chat, who bathe and bandage, who listen, who care. There are the untold faithful who contribute financially with their offerings and gifts to help all of this happen.

When you stop to realize just how many dedicated and faithful people there are who are acting out God’s bringing justice to this world, it is enough to put a song in your heart. A song just like Mary’s, echoing her declaration that “the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.” A song in your heart just begging to burst forth in excitement not only at what God has done, but what God promises to do in the future.

Let it. Burst forth, that is. Let the song that God has created in your heart with his new grace, his old mercy, his timeless love burst forth. Christmas is the perfect opportunity to do just that. Although there seems to be a new escalation of political correctness, because I don’t hear many Christmas carols on the radio these days (I can’t even find the fire log channel on the cable TV!), and I haven’t been in the malls to hear whether carols are being played there, you still can sing along with the carols on channel 68 because the BC Legislature isn’t sitting, and there are other specials on TV. You can even hum Christmas carols on the sidewalks, on buses, and people not only won’t think you’re crazy, they’ll recognize the joy in you that’s causing the songs to burst out. Songs in your heart that proclaim God acting, God with us and among us in a new way, signaled by the birth of the baby named Jesus, the son of Mary, the Son of God, our saviour, God with us, Immanuel, the Christ, our Lord Jesus.