



FIRST LESSON

MICAH 5:2-5A

PSALM

PSALM 80:1-7

OR

ST. LUKE 1:47-55

SECOND LESSON

HEBREWS 10:5-10

GOSPEL LESSON

**ST. LUKE 1:39-45
(46-55)**

PRAYER OF THE DAY

**STIR UP YOUR POWER,
O LORD, AND COME.
TAKE AWAY THE
HINDRANCE OF OUR
SINS AND MAKE US
READY FOR THE
CELEBRATION OF YOUR
BIRTH, THAT WE MAY
RECEIVE YOU IN JOY
AND SERVE YOU
ALWAYS; FOR YOU LIVE
AND REIGN WITH THE
FATHER AND THE HOLY
SPIRIT, NOW AND
FOREVER. AMEN.**

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Liturgical Day: The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Date: December 24, 2006

Sermon Title: Forgiveness, Meaning and Power

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The week before the arrival of Christmas: how many of you can remember what it was like during this week when you were a child? With two young boys in our family, I am finding myself remembering often what it was like for me at that age.

I remember watching Mom put up all the Christmas decorations: the nativity scenes, the table cloths, the candles and wreaths, and finally, the stockings and the tree. Christmas tins would begin to pile up in the front entry way – an unheated room in our house – each of them filled with a different kind of Christmas cookie. (As I got into High School, I learned how to slip into that room unnoticed and sneak my favorite cookies out of their tins without being caught...)

Then over the course of a week or two, presents would begin to pile up under the tree – some purchased by my parents, and others arriving in the mail or with visits. The last few days went by in an agonizingly slow manner. The minutes seemed like hours; the hours seemed like days; the days seemed endless.

Finally, Christmas Eve came. December 22 may be the shortest day in the year, but December 24th is definitely the longest. All day long we kids would wait and fidget and look at the clock and look at the clock and look at the clock. We would spend all morning and all afternoon imagining the evening ritual.

Yesterday I was at the funeral of Larry and Darlene Renevier's 29-year old grandson, Jeremy Wollack. The Pastor told a story about Jeremy as a young boy. He said that on Christmas Day he would wake up in the middle of the morning, at two or three o'clock. He'd sneak down the hallway and wake his sister, and the two of them would sit and watch television for three hours until their parents would finally wake up and let them start opening presents.

I remember that kind of waiting. We always opened our presents on Christmas Eve, so the family would sit down to dinner, the same dinner every year, the same long Christmas Eve dinner every year. Then we would head into the front room and unwrap all of our presents before making our way to the 9:00 service at church. It was one of the most exciting nights of the year. And the weeks of anticipation only seemed to heighten our experience of Christmas giving.

Advent is a season of anticipation – as we anticipate the celebration of our Lord's birth. What does it mean to wait on God in anticipation? I suspect that we answer that question best by looking at the world through a child's eyes. A child who has not yet learned to restrain the outward signs of excitement. A child whose skipping feet and twitching fingers more than hint at the emotions bubbling up to the surface.

There are some who think that Advent should be a somber time, a quiet time of restraint. But that image of a child reminds us that building anticipation is far from somber... far from restrained. In fact, it is exactly the opposite. As the faithful anticipate the coming of this celebration, a joy can begin to build within that simply aches to burst free.

That is the type of anticipation I think of this morning when I consider our Gospel text and Mary's story. Imagine what it must have been like for her to travel through the Judean hill country to the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth, all the while pondering what had happened to her in the past weeks. First there had been Joseph – shy glances,

turning into first dates, leading into a relationship that seemed to have promise for the future. There was the day of their betrothal, when they were promised to one another in an engagement.

Then there was that strange day when Mary received a visitor – one who seemed almost heavenly. This visitor, Gabriel we are told, informed her that something even more fantastic than her relationship with Joseph would happen to her. She would conceive, and bear a son named Jesus. He would reign over the house of David forever, and of his kingdom there would be no end. Gabriel told her something else that was as hard to believe: that her aging aunt Elizabeth also was about to give birth, as proof that nothing was impossible with God.

She tells Gabriel that if this is God's will, she is God's willing servant. Breathlessly she races to Zechariah's and Elizabeth's – half afraid to believe that the words are true. I can picture her alternately running and walking down the dirt lane that led to their house; wondering if they will call her crazy, or affirm what she believes to be true; every step closer to that house and her heartbeat seems to race all the more.

Finally, ready to burst with anticipation, she steps over the threshold and greets Elizabeth. To her delight and amazement, Elizabeth shouts out, filled with God's Holy Spirit, and confirms everything Mary has heard from the angel. Mary literally bursts forth in song – The Magnificat it's called – a song that praises God for choosing her to be a servant of the Good News. A song that proclaims all that God has done, is doing, and will do for those who believe.

It's that image of a breathless Mary, filled with excitement, that I want to take with me through these final hours of Advent anticipation. Because, if the truth is told, the promise that is born anew in us each Christmas season is as real and life changing as the child that would be born to Mary on that first Christmas morn. Real because you and I know the kind of difference Christ can make in a person's life. Real because we have experienced the forgiveness that he longs to share with us – forgiveness that gives us peace with God. Real because we know the meaning that Christian faith gives to our lives – meaning that makes such a difference in how we live, and how we bless the world that surrounds us. Real because we have sensed the power that comes from our faith – power that becomes available to us when the presence of God goes with us wherever we are. These are incredible gifts. These are gifts worth waiting for. And as we prepare our hearts and homes for the arrival of the Christmas season, we prepare ourselves to once again receive these gifts, and be touched by peace and meaning and power.

So together, each year, we anticipate the celebration of the Christmas story. It is a story that we receive each year in faith. It is a story that communicates to us the promise that God wishes to share with us. The promise that is born anew in us at Christmas time is one that can renew our relationship with God. When this is what we find ourselves waiting for, Advent can't be a somber or depressing time. Instead, it is a joyful and exciting time. Like a little child who, year after year, awaits the magic of Christmas Eve.

These past three weeks have indeed been a time of watching and waiting. With the whole world, we've awaited the arrival of one of the richest celebrations known. We've purchased gifts, attended parties, offered wishes of kindness and good cheer. We've reached out to needy neighbors, and remembered the concerns of the world in our prayers. We've experienced what some have come to call a season of sharing. And with the whole church, we've awaited the celebration of our Lord's birth. We've thought of those who waited for centuries for the coming of Christ. We've thought of those who heard the preaching of John in the Judean countryside. We've thought of the ways God wants to be born anew in our own lives. We've even given some thought to the day when our Lord will return in glory.

And now the waiting is all but over. As the Christmas celebration arrives, may it renew our relationship with God. May it deepen our sense of meaning and purpose in life. And may it fill our hearts with God's perfect joy. For one of the last times this year: A blessed Advent to you all. May our coming celebration of the Lord's birth be all that God wants it to be for us.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (December 24, 2006)

English Text: ⁱ

³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." ⁴⁶ And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." ⁱⁱ

Greek Text:

³⁹ Ἀναστᾶσα δὲ Μαριάμ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ταύταις ἐπορεύθη εἰς τὴν ὄρεινὴν μετὰ σπουδῆς εἰς πόλιν Ἰούδα, ⁴⁰ καὶ εἰσήλθεν εἰς τὸν οἶκον Ζαχαρίου καὶ ἠσπάσατο τὴν Ἐλισάβετ. ⁴¹ καὶ ἐγένετο ὡς ἤκουσεν τὸν ἄσπασμόν τῆς Μαρίας ἢ Ἐλισάβετ, ἐσκίρτησεν τὸ βρέφος ἐν τῇ κοιλίᾳ αὐτῆς, καὶ ἐπλήσθη πνεύματος ἁγίου ἢ Ἐλισάβετ, ⁴² καὶ ἀνεφώνησεν κραυγῇ μεγάλη καὶ εἶπεν· εὐλογημένη σὺ ἐν γυναιξίν καὶ εὐλογημένος ὁ καρπὸς τῆς κοιλίας σου. ⁴³ καὶ πόθεν μοι τοῦτο ἵνα ἔλθῃ ἡ μήτηρ τοῦ κυρίου μου πρὸς ἐμέ; ⁴⁴ ἰδοὺ γὰρ ὡς ἐγένετο ἡ φωνὴ τοῦ ἄσπασμοῦ σου εἰς τὰ ὦτα μου, ἐσκίρτησεν ἐν ἀγαλλιάσει τὸ βρέφος ἐν τῇ κοιλίᾳ μου. ⁴⁵ καὶ μακαρία ἡ πιστεύσασα ὅτι ἔσται τελείωσις τοῖς λελαλημένοις αὐτῇ παρὰ κυρίου. ⁴⁶ Καὶ εἶπεν Μαριάμ· Μεγαλύνει ἡ ψυχὴ μου τὸν κύριον, ⁴⁷ καὶ ἠγαλλίασεν τὸ πνεῦμα μου ἐπὶ τῷ θεῷ τῷ σωτῆρι μου, ⁴⁸ ὅτι ἐπέβλεψεν ἐπὶ τὴν ταπείνωσιν τῆς δούλης αὐτοῦ. ἰδοὺ γὰρ ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν μακαριοῦσιν με πᾶσαι αἱ γενεαί, ⁴⁹ ὅτι ἐποίησεν μοι μεγάλα ὁ δυνατός. καὶ ἅγιον τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, ⁵⁰ καὶ τὸ ἔλεος αὐτοῦ εἰς γενεὰς καὶ γενεὰς τοῖς φοβουμένοις αὐτόν. ⁵¹ Ἐποίησεν κράτος ἐν βραχίονι αὐτοῦ, διεσκόρπισεν ὑπερηφάνους διανοίᾳ καρδίας αὐτῶν· ⁵² καθείλεν δυνάστας ἀπὸ θρόνων καὶ ὑψωσεν ταπεινούς, ⁵³ πεινῶντας ἐνέπλησεν ἀγαθῶν καὶ πλουτοῦντας ἐξαπέστειλεν κενούς. ⁵⁴ ἀντελάβετο Ἰσραὴλ παιδὸς αὐτοῦ, μνησθῆναι ἐλέους, ⁵⁵ καθὼς ἐλάλησεν πρὸς τοὺς πατέρας ἡμῶν, τῷ Ἀβραάμ καὶ τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα. ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

ⁱⁱ St. Luke 1:35-55, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Luke 1:35-55, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart).