

Sermon for 19 December 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore
Fourth Sunday of Advent

Scriptures: Micah 5:2-51; Luke 1:46b-55; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:29-45
"Everything"

If we continue with our definition of Advent as a panoramic look at our life of faith, this Sunday has everything not included in the first three Sundays.

Here we have been, with the lights low and our times together mostly full of quiet reflection, rounding out the themes of our private praying, our response to everything that happens to us, as well as to what we see going on in the rest of the world.

That explanation of Advent generally works, since by now all the energies and stunning surprises of Christmastime are going @ full tilt. Even if we've left out some aspects of our life over these past three weeks, the rush and confusion of the season make it seem like almost everything human and divine has been exposed. Spare us more detail!

Locally, we've been shocked at a policewoman's shooting. Internationally, the pandemic is showing new power to change just about every plan and moment for everyone, from markets to medical care.

Politically, that Democrat from West Virginia is Well, let us roll our eyes and bite our tongues.

And then there's the tornado toll that will mark this holiday in so many ways ... and the realization that, all over the world, all throughout history, what may look calm from a distance is really quite astounding and unusual.

So today we're given this phenomenal, tenderly expressive story-teller known as St. Luke, spinning out the details of two cousins, one old, one very young, as they live out their pregnancies and share a moment of each of them, and as they express their deepest thoughts in the light of what we call the Holy Spirit.

We know, as far as we can put history together, that this is the church describing the truth: about Jesus, about the most personal human experience. I mean, surely even though males don't carry and deliver, they can grasp some degree of this part of human living, in the same way females can grasp our uniquely male times. This is nature and spirit at work among us, interpreted by the faith that has grown and expanded among the followers of the Way, as the first Christians began to call themselves.

Then the Letter to the Hebrews, in its less lovely phrases, sums up what was becoming our unique way of talking about God, concluding that the literal

birth, life, and death of the human Jesus teaches us how God works. God assumes human form, and that means we, too, are in some way related to God more fundamentally than the Jews had yet expressed it.

We also hear the prophet Micah, and see the literal prediction of an historic location, and an actual event, that echoes this Christian devotion to Jesus...

All these bits of history, and these predictions that seemed like speculation, are drawn together on this final Sunday of Advent. They complete a way of facing whatever happens to us, and a way of judging anything that happens to other people and the world in general.

It is not the only way. The longer we live, and the more we understand other civilizations, the more humble I believe we are called to be about our way. That, in fact, is what it means to say God became human. Everything I decide, and everything that happens to me, both expands and limits what I'm sure of. Being willing to risk being wrong, and to learn forgiveness, both for myself and for you, my fellow humans, is essential to the Way. This doesn't suit us confident Westerners. Oftentimes, the Eastern religions, and the Native American religions, and the African religions, and the non-religions, the "nones," as we're now calling people who don't have any traditional association with religion or spirituality ... all have much to teach us, and quite a bit to be honored against our frequent pomposity as Christians.

That sums up what I have to offer you as the value of Advent, the purpose of these four quiet weeks of preparation for our great festivals of Christmas and Epiphany. I wonder how long we will center our worship around the opinions of someone we try to educate and prepare to express the historic experience of Christianity. How long will people sit quietly and wait for preachers to tell them what they believe. It could be there should be more dancing and shouting, more art and silence, more taste and touch and smell, than we've made traditional.

Other traditions have things to teach us about getting energized for what we really believe and practice. I'd like to see us look into this in 2022. In the meantime, God bless you in your reflecting and summing up this Advent season and everything it has offered you and all of us to consider and discuss, to believe and to question, and to pray and to learn to pray, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen