

Sermon Notes for 12/20/15 (Advent 4)
Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN
Text: Luke 1:39-55
Theme: FULL WOMBS AND FULFILLED PROMISES

The Point: The God who lifts the lowly and fills the womb is the God who can be trusted to fulfill His promises, especially the promise of salvation through the body of His own dear Son.

Introduction: Our God is a God who lifts the lowly and who fills the womb. These certainties are spelled out clearly in today's readings. But this would not make God a hero for many in polite society today.

Lifting the lowly? Lowliness is not a badge of honor in our world. Being under the thumb of others will cause you to be seen as weak and ineffective. You could be summarily dismissed from consideration if you are lowly and meek and an underdog. In choosing a president, we want to elect someone who is successful, not someone who has flunked out of school, failed in business, suffered several divorces, and gone bankrupt. (Or are the times a-changin'?) When choosing a mate, not many of us go out of our way to find the person who has been rejected by one person after another. If you have a leaky faucet, you don't want the guy who was fired by six previous plumbing companies for doing shoddy work. If people were to look for a hero, would they go looking among the common folk of Israel, among the laboring class of carpenters and wood smiths, among the group of babies born in that backwoods country and in some backwoods village? A God who lifts the lowly would not be seen as a God whom many want to worship.

And what about filling the womb as an act of God? Barrenness, the empty womb was (and is) often seen as a sign of God's disfavor. After all, God could not be showing His favor to a woman who has gone for decades without being able to have a child. For us moderns, filling the womb, as well as giving birth, has been removed from the list of mysteries and miracles overruled by God. It is now seen by most as a purely technical action, explained simply by means of biological principles and scientific intervention. Now we don't even need the sexual union of a man and a woman to generate babies, just an adept clinician, a donor, and a clean test tube. Not only this, but the womb has also become a tomb for many of our children. In the USA since the 1973 Roe v Wade decision legalizing abortion, some 50-55 million abortions have taken place, most as a "simple" birth control method. Roughly 1 in every 5 pregnancies today ends up in abortion. How our hearts ought to break for those children who never see the light of day – and for the mothers and fathers whose lives have been marred and scarred through such decisions. The God who fills the womb certainly can take no joy in this kind of scourge among us.

Unfortunately, we have often bought into the philosophy that says that you get what you deserve. So the "down and out" folks give evidence by their impoverishment and their desperation that God must not be on their side. And people, whether down and out or not, are constantly trying to make sure that God favors them – by doing a "good deed" every day, by doing their religious obeisance, by fulfilling the demands others put on them, by offerings that demonstrate that God can trust them, or by mental gymnastics that justify their actions, no matter how clearly those actions are against God's will. This self-justification works against a good relationship with the God who upholds the lowly and who justifies the sinner.

This sort of existence can only end in hopelessness and despair. If our only hope for improvement lies in our scientific and economic and military expertise, we are of all people most miserable and hopeless. If we are in charge of charting our own future, setting our own criteria for being saved, carving out our own path to heaven, we are in big trouble. We need more than a change of administrations, more than a new set of laws passed by Congress, more than a social or political revolution to bring the hope that we need. But that is just where the Christian message has something vital to say. Our need is right where God starts.

God acts in ways that totally undo our typical worldview about who or what is most valuable and important. What matters? How does God act to save? The origin of God's Deliverer is found in Bethlehem, "one of the little clans of Judah." Bethlehem was one lowly town. In today's Gospel, within the space of 4 verses, the word "womb" occurs three times. The womb as an instrument of salvation? How can this be? God the Creator begins His acts of salvation with the people who are part of His creation. God the womb-filler opens up the barren womb of Elizabeth, who was (in Luke's modest explanation) "getting on in years." The angel announced it to Mary: "This is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren."

This creative, innovative God even makes the virginal womb of Mary spring with life. He does not limit Himself to the "normal rules" of procreation. The Son of God, the Prince of Peace, enters our human existence at its most vulnerable and defenseless, becoming an embryo in the womb of a little Jewish teenager. The prophet had spoken about it in the psalm quoted by the author of Hebrews: "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me." God's ingenious actions are recognized, but only by the lowly and the humble. When Mary comes to the home of Elizabeth, even the unborn child John does cartwheels within his mother's womb. Elizabeth speaks a blessing over Mary: "Blessed is the fruit of your womb" (words that have been embedded deep within Christian consciousness through the rosary of Roman Catholicism). This womb – off limits to anyone but the obstetrician and the gynecologist, who were nowhere to be found on Christmas day – this womb of Mary holds God's promise for man's future. Mary put it this way: "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

God had performed the rib operation on Adam while he was sleeping, so that he could never imagine that Eve had been his doing, but he would know from day one that this was the remarkable work of the Lord alone. The procreative tool of man, from the time of the call of Abraham, had been marked with the carving knife in circumcision, and when it pleases the Lord, he can do without it altogether, so that no man can say, "This salvation is my work" – not even in part! Instead, it is the womb, the receptive organ, which is honored by being the carrier of Messiah's enfleshment. Just so, it is faith, the receptive organ of faith, which is honored by our Lord in being the organ through which we are saved. Not the actions of a man, not his most inspired attempts at love, not his most beneficial service to his neighbor – none of these, but faith is the instrument by which we are attached to the promises of God forever.

It's a good thing Mary wasn't born in our "enlightened" age, where she would have been a prime candidate for the local abortion clinic. Who is this Mary? She is a teenager, pregnant out of wedlock, with no husband in the picture if Joseph goes through with his initial plan to divorce her, unable to provide for herself (or her child), likely to be rejected by immediate family (so she seeks consolation at the home of her distant cousin, who is also miraculously pregnant). She is a nobody, not likely to be on the cover of *Time* as person of the year, for sure. A lowly servant, indeed. And her acceptance of this lowly position is part of her renown.

Mary praises the worthiness of her salvation-bringing God, who "has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." Mary's resume was pretty light on experience and talent. We don't know what she was good at – except perhaps singing and poetry. Oh, and she must have had some leadership ability, at least latent – just see the way she helps to organize that wedding in Cana! Of course, that is some 30 years in the future, after she has raised a family, buried a husband, and seen an eldest son turn his back on the family business to become an itinerant rabbi. At her Son's death, she is "adopted out" to the apostle John, known, not for his brave actions or his inspiring words, but for being the one whom Jesus loved. Mary's lowliness was pretty significant all through her life – funny, given the high praise and renown that she has lately received from people all around the world!

Who would have thought that what was going on in the hill country of Judea and the little towns of Nazareth and Bethlehem would shape the world? But isn't this the way it often happens? Think about the year 1809. The international scene was tumultuous. Napoleon was sweeping through Austria; blood was flowing freely. Nobody then cared about babies. But the reporters overlooked some very significant births. For example, William Gladstone was born that year, destined to become one of England's finest statesman. That same year, Alfred Tennyson was born to an obscure minister and his wife, a child who would one day greatly impact the literary world. On the American continent, Oliver Wendell Holmes was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts. And not far away in Boston, Edgar Allan Poe began his eventful, albeit tragic, life. In that same year a physician named Darwin and his wife named their child Charles Robert. And 1809 also produced the cries of a newborn infant in a rugged log cabin in Hardin County, Kentucky. The baby's name? Abraham Lincoln. If there had been news broadcasts at that time, I'm certain these words would have been heard: "The destiny of the world is being shaped on an Austrian battlefield today." But history was actually being shaped in the cradles of England and America. Similarly, everyone thought taxation was the big news the year that Jesus was born. But a young Jewish woman cradled in her lowly womb the biggest news of all: a Savior. (Adapted from Charles Swindoll)

The destiny of the world was shaped in a manger in Bethlehem. God's promises continue to be fulfilled among the lowly and the insignificant, and we continue to be witnesses to that fulfillment. Has He forgiven you? Let not your tongue be silent about that gift! Has He raised you up in the presence of your enemies? Let praise and thanksgiving be your refrain! Has He chosen to allow you to be a spiritual influence to some of the littlest and lowliest around you? Then rejoice and speak joyfully to them about His saving grace at work in the person of Jesus, your Lord!

Henri Nouwen tells a little parable about life in the womb that encourages us to think carefully about our earthly journey and what follows it. Twins are talking to each other in the womb. The sister says to the brother, "I believe there is life after birth." Her brother protests vehemently, "No, no, this is all there is. This is a dark and cozy place, and we have nothing else to do but to cling to the cord that feeds us." The little girl insists, "There must be something more than this dark place. There must be something else, a place with light where there is freedom to move." Still she cannot convince her twin brother. After some silence, the sister says hesitantly, "I have something else to say, and I'm afraid you won't believe this either, but I think there is a mother." Her brother becomes furious. "A mother!" he shouts. "What are you talking about? I have never seen a mother, and neither have you. Who put that idea in your head? As I told you, this place is all we have. Why do you always want more? This is not such a bad place, after all. We have all we need, so let's be content." The sister is quite overwhelmed by her brother's response and for a while doesn't dare say anything more. But she can't let go of her thoughts, and since she only has her twin brother to speak to, she finally says, "Don't you feel these squeezes every once in a while? They're quite unpleasant and sometimes even painful." "Yes," he answers. "What's special about that?" "Well", the sister says, "I think that these squeezes are there to get us ready for another place, much more beautiful than this, where we will see our mother face-to-face. Don't you think that's exciting?" (Henri Nouwen, *Our Greatest Gift, A Meditation on Dying and Caring*, Harper One, 2009, pages 18-19)

The God who fills the womb and lifts the lowly has a face-to-face encounter prepared for us, when we will see face-to-face the One who gave His life on Calvary that we might live forever, free from the burdens of all our sins, whatever they may be, however heinous, however slight we imagine they are. Our Lord Jesus bled for us to make us God's children forever.

Conclusion: The God who lifts the lowly and who fills the womb is the God who can be trusted to fulfill His promises, especially the promise of salvation through the body of His own dear Son. Jesus entered and exited the virgin's womb so that we might know that He is completely identified with the human

experience. He enters humanity through the “normal” means, except that His conception and birth take place in such a way that He is preserved from sin. Thus He becomes the perfect substitute for us. This Savior has died and risen again to assure us that life is not just a matter of “70 and out” – but there is an eternal mansion being prepared for us. And after the squeezing and narrowness of this life’s suffering and pain and misery, life will really open up for us. This is our Lord’s promise – and it will not fail! AMEN!