

**"Love Is Coming....  
Dec. 24, 2017 -- 4th Advent**

**Micah 5:2-5a**

5:2 But 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.

5:3 Therefore 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.

5:4 And 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; 5 and he shall be the one of peace.

**Luke 1:39-56**

<sup>39</sup>In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup>where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup>and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup>And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup>For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. <sup>45</sup>And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." <sup>46</sup>And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup>for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. <sup>50</sup>His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup>He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup>He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup>he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. <sup>54</sup>He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup>according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." <sup>56</sup>And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

Here we are. Fourth Sunday of Advent and love is coming. We've come a long way to this moment in time, this moment just a few hours shy of peering into the stable and spying the manger complete with Christ child, just a few hours away from the little town of Bethlehem that lies so still in our minds and hearts, just a few hours away until the night sky bursts into light and sound and we hear an angel saying, "Fear not for behold..." Just a few hours from being 'sore afraid' with shepherds on a hill side who with the heavenly hosts ringings in their ear decide, right along with us, to go to Bethlehem and see this thing that the Lord has made known to us..." Just a few hours from the emotional and visceral feeling of finally, finally, after this long Advent trek, after 12 months of a hard year, after a life time of expectation -- getting to Bethlehem.

It's quite a journey in time from the cry of Isaiah, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the dessert a hiway for our God." Which literally meant 'build a road and go home from captivity'... A road from punishment and banishment and sojourn to ***"comfort ye, comfort ye my people my people, saith your God."*** A way in the wilderness – **the wilderness for God's people --- -then.**

In our Advent living we've listened as over the centuries the echo of that ancient 'prepare ye' was adopted and championed by John the Baptist who cried out once again, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" Only for John the wilderness was the wildness, the wantonness, the darkness of the human heart. And the way

to be prepared is in the human heart. We're been there on our Advent sojourn with John from the moment he leaps in his mother's womb at the sight of Mary's pregnant, expectant, mother of God being, bearing the one for whom the way is to be prepared.

The Advent way then is a way as real as I-95 complete with bumps and signs along the way declaring what's coming. What each exit along the way promises. The Advent way is as real as the strings of our heart being plucked with **'have holly jolly it's the best time of the year'** and *'chesnuts roasting on an open fire'* and *'joy to the world'* and *'silent, night, holy night'* which creates in us the stir, the desire, the need to *'Come to Bethlehem to see, him whose birth the angels sing, Come adore on bended knee, Christ the Lord the newborn King – and to hear, Gloria in excelsis Deo, Gloria in excelsis Deo.'*

Here, right now, at the end of Advent we strain to know, like children sneaking into the living room to discover which presents are for them, to see God's present for us and the two who would deliver it to the world. These two, whose journey was physically an arduous one of about 100 miles – walking, pregnant and near labor miles and for how long, 5 – 6 – 7 days?

Don't you know along that long way that like a child Joseph wanted to hear again and again about the visit of the angel, and her visit to see Elizabeth, to the baby leaping within her. And in the telling Mary, quiet, pondering Mary, saying that it was more like she was **sent** there at first, but then she was so glad to be

there when Elizabeth had John. She learned so much that she would need to know for herself. She told Joseph about those words, like poetry, like a song, that poured from her in response to all that she was feeling -- overwhelmed really. "My soul magnifies the Lord,<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior," She smiled that Elizabeth had called her 'blessed among women.' If it wasn't for this baby, she thought, I'd just be Mary, a girl from Nazareth.... But somehow she knew she was destined for more...or at least the angel had said so.

We wonder where they stayed each night, where and with whom they camped along the way. Part of the journey would have been in the very chilly at night hill country. Part through the Jordan Valley—which is below sea level—where the temperatures would have been mild and pleasant.

The last leg of the route would have been the hardest of all. Jericho, the last town of any size along the way is the lowest city on the globe, and Jerusalem and Bethlehem are situated right in the top of the hills. From Jericho's desert to Bethlehem is an uphill hike of 3,500 feet. How exhausted Mary must have been! How anxious Joseph must have been to find a comfortable room in some appropriate place.

It's the fourth Sunday of Advent and like children, aren't we all children, we're ready to be there. Enough with this journey, this trip, this advent already. We're ready to find simple Joseph and young Mary -- and go with them on the last few miles of their way to Bethlehem. Sharing feelings and catching mental

images and glimpses of what is to be. Don't you wonder if they know, in the limitations of the world in which they live, how terribly, terribly, the world needs what they protect and bring to bear in the city of David?

The whole world has watched and waited for so long for God to act -- and God has chosen these simple people to bring redemption to the world. It is so much like God and so much like the one who is coming -- Jesus -- to know and say to us that this is how God works in our midst. That we are supposed to watch and wait and be ever vigilant -- ready for the moment when God will make a great thing happen. Like a thief in the night -- like a baby whose time has come and will wait no longer to be born -- God will come to us!

And in the Advent of our lives, how utterly, desperately we need God to come, even now. To fulfill that which has been, in Jesus, in Mary's Jesus of manger and cross begun.

God comes to us in the unexpected -- in the birth of a child -- because the birth in all of its tumult represents how all of us, as God's whole creation has waited with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God. We wait in a world that is literally in labor -- in pain, that suffers, that is not itself, that endures the indescribable humiliation of being exposed as a world of tortuous sinfulness -- waiting for the suffering to be ended, waiting for the delivery of the child of salvation to end all of our human frustration and to adopt, to redeem us.

So yes, on this 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent we love the story of Mary and Joseph, and in this Advent more than others we know that like the story, the world is not at all pretty. There is here pain and suffering and labor -- in the laboring world there is sickness and disease. There is human evil, there is injustice and poverty, there is greed and desperate human need, there is intolerance, and there is war! And we cry out in voices which reflect both the joy of what God can do and in the pain of the world in which we live -- 'O Come!, yes, Come Jesus, Come again, to your own through the world's long labor, As we grown in travail with the earth. God will come! We will cry with surprise (as God comes like a baby born in a manger in the night) opening our eyes, opening our eyes!

We will join our voices, the voices of those who groan in labor -- come, Jesus, Come! Come and teach us how beat our swords into plowshares, and our spears into pruning hooks. Come and deliver us so that nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. Come into that silent night pierced by the cries of this pilgrim mother and child -- this God chosen girl, giving birth to this God chosen son -- who will in the fullness of time -- in the fullness of her labor -- redeem the world! //

Just a few more hours and we will see once more our hope fulfilled, we will experience true peace, we will know immeasurable joy.... when love comes down we will know love and be loved. We will rest in the warm glow of candlelight, filled

with table grace, and find ourselves gathered with shepherds and wise people  
throughout the ages kneeling on a silent and holy night –

At the manger listening for words that tell us we prepared the way, our hearts are  
ready to hear -- "Peace on the earth, good will to all,

From heaven's all gracious King":

The world in solemn stillness lays, To hear the angels sing."