

In His Time

Wayne Waibel – 12/22/2024

This morning's Gospel lesson is set not in the cultural and trade centers of Israel, but in the hill country of Judah. It is at this point in history that we find Mary paying a visit to her cousin Elizabeth. These two women of humble origins were about to give birth to the beginning of salvation for all humanity.

It's no accident that this epic saga begins in a location apart from the clamor of first century Palestine. It is a sturdy reminder for us to always look for God's activity in people and places that are off the map.

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Upon hearing Mary's greeting, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, as was her unborn child. She proclaimed the Lordship of what Mary carried in her womb before Mary even had a chance to tell her the good news of her pregnancy.

These two women who were held in the lowest regard – Elizabeth because she had been barren her whole life and in ancient times a woman's entire worth was based on her ability to bear children, and Mary for having a child out of wedlock.

And yet they both rejoiced and sang praises because they believed what the angels had foretold. In a very deliberate sense, they found solace and content in the gift of each other.

It's interesting to note that Zacharias, Elizabeth's husband – also an esteemed member of the priesthood – a very learned man – could not bring himself to believe and was struck mute, whereas Mary's reaction to the proclamation of God's intent for her was not only to believe, but to give permission, "Let it be to me according to your word." A teenage girl stepping up where a fully-grown man could not.

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It is generally agreed among theologians that Christ was born around 4 B.C.E. The same year Herod died. And with that death came rebellion in the Jewish nation. Enter the Roman imperial forces to quell the rebellion in the form of the Syrian army. If you were not killed, raped, or enslaved by the merciless Syrians – you were left with nothing. Abject poverty. And it was into this world Christ was born.

These are days when we don't have a lot going for us either. Global conflict dominates the airwaves. National gridlock in the political arena essentially eliminates practical, productive resolutions. We continue to ignore our natural world, and don't even get me started on artificial intelligence.

The bitter pill to swallow is that this is nothing new. I dare say we are growing accustomed to this scenario. And the truly sad fact about it all is that we expect it. I won't go so far as to say we feel we deserve it, but that's kind of what it is turning toward.

The new normal is a term I hear bandied about in an almost cavalier way to excuse what would've been considered abhorrent a generation or two ago. I don't want to dwell on the bleakness that permeates our daily lives, but it does bear mentioning if only in comparison to the trials and tribulations present at the birth of our Savior.

In the birth of Christ, God enters humanity. That serves to amplify the need in this age to celebrate the birth of Jesus – who overcame the world in His time. Why not in ours also?

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Against the backdrop of life in Palestine at the time of Christ's birth, we have these two unassuming women sharing the spotlight. God has a most wonderful way of choosing the lowly, the poor and the outcast to put forth his message. And in this case, Mary and Elizabeth, a teenage girl and a barren old woman are whom God has chosen to birth the messenger and the message.

There are people that will argue that God has far more important matters to attend than our own little day-to-day comings and goings, but the truth is that Jesus **is** concerned with our social realities. He has to be. In His time on earth the Roman Empire was inextricably tied to the spiritual life of its people. It's how they ruled! The full title of the Roman Emperor translated to English read, "Commander Caesar, son of the divine."

While Jesus preached love and peace instead of victory and oppression, he was no less concerned for the societal pressures His beloved people endured. It is no accident that the meek are in line to inherit the earth – that Christ spent the vast majority of His time with the poor – that God works through the marginalized and lowly while He sends the rich and powerful away empty **all the time.**

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In 1982, the Nickolai Church of Leipzig in East Germany started holding prayer meetings in the evening every Monday. They became known as peace prayers. These were prayer meetings that took on a political flavor as time went on and they evolved into prayers for peace and democracy.

As time passed, word of these weekly prayer meetings grew, as did their popularity. In early autumn 1989, as the world was recovering from the massacre of Tiananmen Square in China, the prayer meetings grew to overflowing out into the streets of the city.

On October 9th that prayer meeting was in the cross hairs of the secret police who were prepared to suppress the demonstration by any means necessary. What they were not prepared for was a gathering of 70,000 people who were all holding candles and singing.

When you are outside holding a candle you need both hands – one to hold the candle – the other to block the wind. When you have both hands occupied, you are unable to throw rocks or raise your fists in defiance, both gestures that would have prompted the police to attack. But the authorities were not prepared for that large a crowd bent on peacefully demonstrating, so they did the only thing they could do – let it happen.

And it was filmed by not only the communist bloc, but western news agencies as well. The resultant publicity catapulted the cause of democracy to the tune of hundreds of thousands of demonstrators until one month later, the leader of the German Democratic Republic declared East Germans free to cross to the West and the Berlin Wall was demolished.

So Diplomatic efforts from John F. Kennedy to Ronald Reagan had less impact on the Cold War than a church's weekly prayer meetings. God delights in taking what is small and insignificant in the eyes of the world to do extraordinary and unexpected things. Like taking the faith of a teenage girl and blessing her with a child, a savior, which is Christ the Lord. Amen.