

Daring to Proclaim Joy  
Luke 1: 24, 25, 57-66  
December 11, 2011  
Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

It's become known in our family as the "great Christmas tree fiasco." It happened last year, in fact, just about this time. For the previous 26 years, we had always cut our Christmas tree at a family farm not far from our home. Each year we enjoyed the horse-drawn wagon ride to the fields, where we were left to tramp around until we found and cut down the "perfect" tree. That was followed by a ride back to the barn, hot chocolate, and watching the trains and the live animals. It is a part of our family tradition, a part of what it means for us to prepare for Christmas.

So last year, we bundled up and headed out to cut our tree. Except that when we got to the farm, it was closed. *Closed!* Not because there weren't trees. Not because there wasn't hot chocolate. But it was closed because it was *Sunday!* No tree cutting, no wagon rides, no hot chocolate.... because the owners had discovered *Jesus!* And in their faithfulness they decided that they would close their business during the busiest time of the year so that they could honor their faith. Well, good for *Jesus* but that left *us* in a real mess!

There's a whole long story that follows about how we went to three other places to look for a tree, about how we didn't get the horse-drawn wagon ride, the walk through the fields, or the hot chocolate. What we *did* get was sarcastic about how these folks "found Jesus" and as a result we couldn't find a tree! This year we went back to our old familiar place and got our tree on *Saturday*, and with it a tract about salvation....it made me think about how comfortable, or not, we are about talking about our faith, particularly at this time of year, about sharing our joy, about

risking our reputation, our livelihood, ourselves in faithfulness....it got me thinking about Elizabeth.

Elizabeth plays a minor role in the Christmas story, or so it seems. She gets these few lines we've read in Luke plus a couple more when John is born. Her son isn't the center of the story, you see; he's just the lead up man, the warm up band, the one to get you ready for the *real* thing. But that doesn't seem to matter to Elizabeth! After years and years of being unable to conceive she finds herself pregnant. The first century Jewish understanding of infertility was that it was a reflection of divine disfavor. Despite the fact that Luke clearly describes both Zechariah and Elizabeth as "righteous before God, living blamelessly according to the commandments," Elizabeth's own words of relief at her pregnancy reflect her assumption of God's displeasure with her life. "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

The inability to bear a child, particularly a male child, was indeed a public disgrace. Elizabeth had endured years of scrutiny by her community because she had failed to fulfill her assumed role as wife and mother. Yet when she finally becomes pregnant she is not filled with arrogance nor lingers in resentment for the way she's been treated; rather she publically affirms her faith in God.

Elizabeth's confidence of faith shines through even more boldly when Mary arrives to stay with her. Pregnant now with Jesus, Mary seeks Elizabeth's wisdom and companionship, away from the eyes of the curious villagers. When Mary enters Elizabeth's house, Luke tells us that the baby within Elizabeth leaps in her womb! And Elizabeth, filled with God's Spirit, proclaims her joy! "Blessed are you!" she declares as she expresses her wonder at this visitation. Filled

with gratitude and amazement, she affirms both Mary's faith and her own understanding; Elizabeth proclaims joy!

I wonder how many times we outwardly and unashamedly proclaim joy, declaring God's presence in our midst! Elizabeth does not hesitate to name what is happening to her and to claim the experience as a holy moment, impregnated by God's Spirit. There is no doubt for her about the connection: what Mary's experiencing and what Elizabeth's experiencing are extraordinary expressions of God's activity in their lives. Her baby leaps in recognition! Elizabeth names it and bold pronounces God's presence in their midst.

I admit that often I am not the first to speak outwardly about God. Strange perhaps, given my professional role. In fact, sometimes it makes me uncomfortable to hear people declaring things done in God's name and by God's power, much like we mocked the Christmas tree farmer who "got Jesus" and made us miss out on a tree! During this holiday season it's easy to do all the *cultural* Christmas things and never find reason to talk about God's coming among us, about how we experience the birth of Jesus in our own lives of faith, about why this season matters to those of us who believe. We don't always find it easy to identify our experiences as the direct result of God, although lately I have noticed several of my friends referring to occurrences in their lives as "God moments", when things fell together in a certain, unexpected way.

Undoubtedly Elizabeth experiences a "God moment" in her pregnancy and in her meeting with Mary; I wonder, what are the "God moments" of our own lives? Do we see the connections in our lives as actually *coming* from God or do we refer to them as happenstances of good fortune or luck? I am always curious about the number of times my students write or talk about "fate" and I wonder what that means to them. They speak of "karma" as well, using the term in a rather generic way, not expressing a particular belief or way of thinking about the world. What is

it that holds us back from naming the Presence at work in us? Can we be as bold as Elizabeth? Can we *name* the action and presence of God in our lives? Or do we just pass it off as coincidence, as a fluke, or as something we've made happen on our own?

It seems to me, the more I think on it, that naming God in the circumstances of our lives is a kind of incarnation in itself. We who are waiting once again for God to break in may be missing the fact that God is already here, already working, already healing, helping, waiting, listening---but we have just not named it yet! We have just not heard or seen or dared to proclaim what our hearts tell us, what our spirits know---that *this is* of God! *All of it!* Dare we declare that God is in our midst, in our messy, mixed-up, far from perfect lives? Lest we think this "Emmanuel" is out of our reach, outside our grasp, let us remember that Joseph wanted to "dismiss her quietly", that Mary asked "how can it be so?," that Zechariah needed a sign, that Elizabeth had been disgraced. Lest we think we are off the hook, that we are excused from declaring the truth of what we see, the joy of what we know, the transformation that we've experienced, remember unsophisticated shepherds and wandering wise ones.... All who dared to proclaim the joy of experiencing Jesus! Before and after his birth!

The truth is that God *is* present whether I notice or not! But my faith is deepened and expanded when I pay attention, when I dare to name, when I risk whatever is at risk for me by saying aloud what my spirit knows: that God is with us, that God is at work in us, that our lives are not accidental or incidental, but a reflection of the glory of God. The Christmas tree farmer risked a lot by closing his lucrative business on Sundays this time of year. We started cutting there the very first year he opened his farm; he was located in the middle of "nowhere", surrounded by farms. Now his fields are locked in between great, suburban neighborhoods and literally hundreds and hundreds of people come to cut trees (and in other seasons of the year, to

pick apples, pumpkins, flowers); he must be making more money than he ever dreamed of! But he's closed on Sundays throughout the year because of his faith; because he sets aside a Sabbath day. He dares to proclaim his faith even at significant financial loss...and I respect him for it and his witness in the world. Well, I did eventually – after I got past my frustration of “great Christmas tree fiasco”. After I got over the fact that proclaiming faith is not about convenience, or my time, or the opinions of others. Proclaiming faith is about proclaiming God's presence in our lives, in how we live and how we talk about what God is doing in our midst.

Elizabeth dares to proclaim her joy! To give voice to the life-giving activity of God in her life! So who and what do *we* have to proclaim this Advent/Christmas season? *What story have we got to tell about our faith?* Let us dare to proclaim our joy as we experience and name God's incarnation to us!