

December 20, 2009

Micah 5:2-5a

Luke 1:39-56

### “Blessed Belief”

The mood for many at this time of year is one of joy and excitement. This is definitely true for kids, isn't it? I think adults relish being around children at Christmas in part to just catch a little of that spirit.

The Scriptures this morning also convey excited anticipation and joy. The reading from Micah anticipates, celebrates and proclaims the birth of a great ruler in the small village of Bethlehem. The Gospel text tells us of the joy and expectation of two women in the same family, both pregnant with a special child. Elizabeth, pregnant in her old age with John the Baptist, greets Mary, pregnant with Jesus, who sings a song of praise to God.

There's nothing quite like the joy of expecting the arrival of a child into a family, whether through birth or adoption. But there is also anxiety. It's almost impossible not to worry. When going through the process of adoption, the applications, the home studies, the waiting can be almost excruciating. When a family member or friend is pregnant we can't help but have concern for the mother's and baby's health. Life is so “iffy”. It is stressful. How can we really rejoice when we're never sure everything is going to be all right?

Let's think about Mary for a moment. Psychologist Thomas Holmes has developed a “stress scale”, which I expect many of you have read about. It's a chart that assigns points to various stress producing experiences in life. Any score of 200 or more puts a person at risk of getting sick. The chart lists situations and events that we easily recognize as potentially stressful. Some are positive things- they aren't all negative. It appears that nearly any kind of CHANGE produces stress: loss of a job, getting a promotion, moving to a new house or city, beginning a new relationship, death of a loved one, an addition to the family, starting a new program of study, graduating from school. Dr. Holmes even includes CHRISTMAS on the scale. Christmas alone, not a hard Christmas after a job loss or death of a loved one----- just getting through Dec. 25<sup>th</sup> in our culture gives you a hefty 14 stress points!

Bridget Kuhns took Dr. Holmes' scale and applied it to Mary. Any pregnancy earns 40 points; an unexpected pregnancy adds 20 more. A change in living conditions adds 25 points. (Remember Mary stayed three

months with Elizabeth.) Marriage is worth 50 points. A change in financial status is 38 points. 35 points are chalked up to an argument with a spouse. It seems plausible that Mary and Joseph might have had a few tense moments with all they went through. When you look ahead to the night in the stable, the birth of the baby, changes in sleeping habits that come with a newborn, changes in eating habits when traveling and camping out, dealing with uninvited guests, the shepherds coming and going—the scholars from the East--- the points really start accumulating!

Ms Kuhns totaled the points Mary accumulated as she lived through the experiences we treasure and remember at Christmas. Keep in mind that 200 points put a person in to the heavily stressed out category. Mary's grand total? 424 points!

It's very difficult for us to enter into pure joy and expectation once we are past early childhood. Life is so complicated and messy and at times just plain HARD. How can we celebrate Christ's birth when we are filled with anxiety about the present and the future, about what may be lurking around the next turn on the road of life?

There's a reason Jesus taught us we must be like little children to enter the kingdom of heaven. Do little children know what lies ahead on the road of life? Of course not. But, you may say, they have adults in their lives they trust, so they don't HAVE to worry. They aren't given the task of working things out that the adults in their lives must deal with.

Friends, there's truth in this. But there's a reason why Jesus talks about God as our loving parent. We are the children of God. God loves and cares for us, more profoundly than we can ever manage. As our faith and trust in God grow, perhaps we can move closer to savoring the joy of life and Christmas just like little children do.

Remember Mary? With her 424 stress points she was able to trust God as a child trusts a loving parent. I call that kind of trust "blessed belief". One of my favorite verses of Scripture is found in today's Gospel: Elizabeth shouted with joy when she saw Mary and then said "**Blessed is she who believed what God said, believed every word would come true.**" Mary had blessed belief. Blessed belief means we trust God's promises so completely that we thank God for their fulfillment **EVEN BEFORE THEY ARE FULFILLED!**

This is what Mary did in her song, her prayer, called the Magnificat. She praised God and thanked him for accomplishing his plan for all people everywhere.

Mary celebrated God's plan in which the powerful, rich and haughty tumble from their heights of arrogance. She celebrated the ways God lifts the poor and lowly. She praised God for the favor bestowed on her, a young woman of low estate, chosen to bear God's Son. Mary was so confident, so trusting in her faith in God's justice, mercy and grace, that her expression of hope was stated in the PAST TENSE! Mary proclaimed truths as though what SHALL BE is ALREADY true. That is blessed belief: trust in God's promises to the point where we thank God for their fulfillment ALREADY.

*My soul magnifies the Lord, for he has done great things for me.* This is not merely a recognition of what God has done so far; it is also a celebration of all that God will yet do. *He has scattered the proud... put down the mighty from their thrones....exalted those of low degree."*

What are the promises God has made to us? What are the promises we can thank him for, trusting like a child that he will accomplish what he has said? God promises us forgiveness for our sins.  
God promises he will be with us through everything we encounter- floods, storms, fire, drought, peril of all kinds.  
God promises to live in us.  
God promises to make us more like Jesus.  
God promises to give us joy and peace.  
God promises to carry us through death itself into new life beyond death.

These are God's promises to us. Blessed are we who believe what God tells us, and who believe every word will come true.

This blessed belief changes every aspect of our lives. We may struggle to believe like Mary did. Life is so tangled at times. And maybe we can't trust like that every minute of every day. But we need to remember Mary- who even with her 424 stress points celebrated God's promises and trusted they would come true. May this Advent time, these days before the arrival of Christmas, be a time for blessed belief. God makes promises. God keeps promises. Blessed be the name of our Lord. AMEN!