

Sermon by Rev. Martha Shiverick  
20 December 2009  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
Cleveland Heights, OH  
**Finding Hope in the Season of Darkness**  
**Text: Luke 1:39-55**

This morning you will be singing the Magnificat as part of our scripture lesson so I invite you to open up your Hymnal to hymn #600 and listen now for the word of the Lord as it is written in Luke 1:39-55

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

And Mary said... (Hymn #600)

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The Magnificat... We know it is Mary's song of joy and thanksgiving to God on being chosen to bear the Son of God. It is a poem that we hear every Advent as we prepare for birth of Jesus once again. And although it is indeed a song of joy, if we look at the words it is also a song about how the coming of this child will change the world as we know it. Even in the choice of Mary to be the mother of Jesus, we see that God is doing a new thing with the birth of Jesus. Mary sings a song of thanksgiving for God bestowing on her, a handmaiden of lowly estate the greatest honor of all: to be the savior's mother. Shouldn't this be given to someone of more standing in the community? If God gives this honor to Mary, then what will God do for the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed of the world? This baby will change things. Mary sings that the baby will scatter the proud, will lift up the lowly, will fill the hungry with good things, and will bring about social change. Wow, most expectant mothers are only hoping for a healthy baby boy or girl! Mary's song is quite a contrast!

I want to share with you a personal confession. It has taken me a long time to listen to the magnificat with anything other than pain and sadness. Even though I am usually an upbeat positive person, I am also one of those people who feels a little weepy during advent. I tend to focus on the dichotomy between the vision of the peace, and our world at war, the vision of justice and our knowledge of people going to sleep at night homeless, hungry, and without a secure future, and the vision of happy families around a table when there are so many people alone and feeling left out of the Christmas cheer. One year it was particularly bad. I was pregnant with my daughter Nonie and had taken a routine blood test during the pregnancy before Advent began. Unfortunately the results of the blood test showed that there was a high chance that

there was an abnormality with the fetus and the doctor asked that I have an amniocentesis to see if and what we were facing. I had the test and then had to wait. And wait. And wait. Waiting for results like that is not easy to do. By the time the Sunday that the Magnificat was read at church came around, I was good and angry at God and really did not like Mary for her silly song. She sang, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior." If I could have scratched her face and pulled out her hair I would have. Fortunately the outcome of the amniocentesis test showed that I was having a healthy baby girl, but the experience was something that has stayed with me. Advent is not a happy time for many people. Advent is a lonely dark time for many who are alone, who are in bereavement, who are feeling financial hardship, or who are having family stresses.

The situation becomes more acute when society places unrealistic pictures and goals for us. During this holiday season we are to be with loved ones. Our social calendars are to be filled and our job as adults is to provide the Christmas fantasy for the young. We are to sit at a Christmas dinner and enjoy music, family, conversation, and merrymaking. And the truth is, often our reality does not match up to the Dickens-onian Christmas picture. Sometimes it is just an experience and a day to get through. Sean Miller found this video for me that I want to share with you now. It is to me a true Advent message as it is a reminder of what Christmas is to some.

## VIDEO

OK – Is there a dry eye in the chapel?

Between the haunting melody of "O Come, O Come, Emanuel", the solitary life of the older man waking up in his house all by himself and frying and eating his singular egg, and then going to the mall to work as Santa Claus really pulls at our emotional heart strings! When Sean first showed it to me, he said that to make himself feel better he imagined that the man's job as Santa might be a light in his life. He entered that mall and was surrounded by people who came to see him, who sat on his lap and were filled with smiles and laughter and Christmas carols. And perhaps that is what we can wish for all who are lonely this Christmas, that they find some way to connect and be with people and be in community. Perhaps they will find it in the church. Perhaps we can be the message of God's love and hope to the person sitting next to us at church, the person who is alone at coffee hour, the person whose struggles and sorrows we do not know. Advent and Christmas is a time for community and in community we care for those among us who are struggling, who are on edge, who are in need of our love and support.

However we can go deeper with the video. I continue to be struck by the haunting hymn, the prayer of "O Come O Come Emanuel", Oh Come O Come, God with Us. We yearn; we know that our truest desire and happiness is to have God with us, and that that is exactly what this Christmas season is all about. In our loneliness, in our heartaches, in our illnesses, in our poverty and war; in the whole insecure world in which we live; our cry is for God to be with us. O Come, O Come, Emanuel, O Come O Come and be with us God. O Come God and be with that man in the video, the person

in the hospital receiving devastating news, the family who has just buried a loved one, and the homeless man leaving the shelter for the day on this cold morning.

John Buchanan wrote in his Christmas editorial in this month's Christian Century magazine, "That most human question, "Where is God" prompts the answer of faith: God is there as suffering happens, as innocents die, as disease claims its victims. God comes and God is there, in the midst of it all. And that is what lies beneath all the hoopla of Christmas: an idea that is so big we don't even have words adequate to express it so we use ancient words, more precious every year: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

God with us is the gift we celebrate at Christmas. God being with us is what will help us through our culture's celebration of this holiday that is hard on so many. And Mary's joy that she sings in her song of praise and thanksgiving is for the coming of our Lord, who changes the world, who feeds the hungry, who lifts up the lowly. If God can choose Mary, a lowly "hand maiden of lowly estate" to bear the Christ child, then just think what God could do with us... If God gives this honor to Mary, then what will God do for the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed. We can celebrate the gift that God is with us; God is with all of us and will not abandon us in our times of grief, of illness, and of insecurity. Our job as Christians is to show this love. We are to show how God is with each person in our acts of caring and through the ways we show God's love.

I would like to close by sharing a note that I received from one of our members that is homebound. She is one of our members that is over 100 years of age. As you know the Deacons take the Sunday flowers each week and split them up and give them to people who are on our prayer list or are having a birthday or other life event. They also take a poinsettia during Advent and Easter flowers to all our older or homebound members. Sometimes I receive notes telling me how meaningful these deliveries are. In her note she thanks the deacons for all the beautiful flowers she has received and then says that more importantly to be remembered is the real joy of receiving them. She thanks us one and all. So dear Fairmount-ers, this Christmas I thank you on behalf of all the homebound members who received your care, on behalf of the members of our church who received meals when they were recovering from surgeries, on behalf of the hundreds of people who received flowers, on behalf of homeless men and women who received coats and hygiene products, on behalf of the children at Anton Gridina who received Christmas gifts, on behalf of the people who will receive the mittens and scarves on the mitten tree, and on behalf of every person greeted and hugged at coffee hour. Through these ways and so many more you witness to the true gift of Christmas, that God is indeed with us. Immanuel! Amen!