

December 19, 2021 - Advent 4

Prayer of the Day

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. With your abundant grace and might, free us from the sin that binds us, that we may receive you in joy and serve you always, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Hebrew Scriptures - Micah 5:2-3

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. 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.

Gospel - Luke 1:39-45

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."

Sermon

Before birth comes pregnancy
That time when the process has begun
And there are clues that it's underway
But the full arrival has yet to take place
And while there is much to be done in preparation
Life also becomes a waiting game

But while we prepare
And while we wait
We also anticipate
We look forward
We dream
And we wonder how things are going to change for us

Some of the change is obvious
Feeding at all times
Sleepless nights
Diapers
Visits from friends and family

Some of the change is less clear
How *many* sleepless nights will there be until a routine is started?
How will I know if the crying is simply hunger or something more serious?
Will I be able to go back to work, or will I want to?
Can I really do this?

And it is this experience
Of waiting while anticipating
Of excitement mixed with anxiety
Which has given rise to the phrase

“Pregnant Pause”

It's that time when we collectively hold our breath
Knowing that we have reached the Tipping Point of the story
And that whatever direction things go
Everything will be different
From now on

There will be no going back

This day
This Fourth Sunday of Advent
Is our Pregnant Pause
In which we take a deep breath
Take one last look at where we were
And get ready to plunge into what will be

The readings today are full of Pregnant Pauses

The Hebrew Prophet Micah
Says that things will be put on hold
“Until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth”

Salvation for the people is just around the corner
Restoration is already on the way
In fact, it's being born right now

But in this particular moment
At this distinct instant of time
There will be a brief stop
(Which can feel like it's lasting forever!)
And then it will arrive

That's what you call a Pregnant Pause!

And Luke's story
Of pregnant Mary rushing to visit pregnant Elizabeth
And stopping to listen to them sing to each other

Is a *gorgeous* Pregnant Pause

In which two women take centre stage
In the grand story of salvation
And celebrate what God has done
What God is doing
What God is going to do
In *them*

And *through* them

It is *in* this pause
And perhaps even because *of* this “slow down” in the story

That we can catch a glimpse
Of what God is really doing in these two women

And maybe
If we take advantage of this day
Our *own* Pregnant Pause
We too can begin to catch a glimpse
Of what God is really doing in *us*

The temptation with Pregnant Pauses
Is to want to skip them
To hurry up and turn the page
To push past the waiting and wondering
(And, let's be honest, the worrying)
And get to the point of finally *knowing*
Knowing what's coming
Knowing what the results will be
Knowing how long it will take
Knowing what we can do about it
Knowing how we can avoid the worst parts
Maybe even knowing the end of the story

Whether that be the latest Covid numbers
And if there will be another lockdown

Or what the future of our congregation will actually be
And what we can do to support it (or escape it)

Or even what our own, individual future will look like
And how soon will we get there

You see the problem, right?

When we try to avoid
Or circumvent
The Pregnant Pauses of life
We miss the opportunities they offer us

To stop
To breath
To contemplate
To reflect
To discern
To wonder
To look back
To re-evaluate
To anticipate
To be present in the Now

And to be present with the One who accompanies us
In the Now
Even as we wait for the final arrival

Of the promise that's coming
And is even now
On the way

This day
This Fourth Sunday of Advent
Is a gift
An opportunity
A Pregnant Pause
In which we can take a deep breath
Take one last look at where we were
And get ready to plunge into what will be

It is *in* this pause
And perhaps even *because* of this "slow down" in our story
That we can catch a glimpse
Of what God is really doing
In us
And in this hurting world

So stop
Breathe
Contemplate
Reflect
Discern
Wonder

And join pregnant Mary and pregnant Elizabeth
In singing your Pregnant Pause
In joyful anticipation
Of the Advent of our God

Prepare the way of the Lord

Amen

Prayers of the People

As we begin again, let us offer our prayers to the God who has promised to hear us.

[*Short pause*]

A - O come, O come, Emmanuel. Show us how you are entering our realities, and kindle hope within us, that, with Elizabeth and Mary, we, too, might sing of your coming. God who comes,

C - Fill us with hope.

A - O come, O come, Emmanuel. We admit to feeling overwhelmed: by Covid, by injustice, by incessant demands on our time, by illness, by death. Remind us that your love defines who we are, and give us faith to trust your promise, even in the middle of our current anxiety. God who comes,

C - Fill us with hope.

A - O come, O come, Emmanuel. Our world is groaning under the combined weight of neglect, cynicism and despair. We *do* care about your creation, yet we are not always sure how to respond. Give us a vision of where we need to go, and give us the courage to take one step. God who comes,

C - Fill us with hope.

A - O come, O come, Emmanuel. Your coming has formed us into a community of care and hope.
Provide your church the faith we need to respond to your coming, and to share that hope with all
around us. God who comes,

C - Fill us with hope.

A - O come, O come, Emmanuel. Come to our hospital rooms, our jail cells, our homeless shelters, and
our homes. Open us to your Advent among all the hurting people of this world, especially those we
name before you.

[Long silence]

God who comes,

C - Fill us with hope.

A - O come, O come, Emmanuel. Show us how you are entering our realities, and kindle hope within
us, that, with Elizabeth and Mary, we, too, might sing of your coming. God who comes,

C - Fill us with hope.

P - Into your hands we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through Jesus Christ
our Lord.

C - Amen.