

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, Year C
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania
Sunday, 24.xii.2006, 10:00, Holy Eucharist – LBW 2
Malachi 5:2-5a, Luke 1:46b-55, Hebrews 10:5-10, Luke 1:39-45

Jesu Juva!

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who
was and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

*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.*

~ Luke 1:39,40

If you were in deep trouble and had no one nearby to whom you could turn, where would you go? The great American poet, Robert Frost, wrote of 'home' that it is "that place where, when you go there, they have to take you in." But we know that that is not true for all, and it was apparently not so for the Blessed Mother of Our Lord. Some are driven from their

homes, as she was, by wrath or misunderstanding or fear. Others, in their thousands, are driven by want or war from their homes as refugees, often never able to return to the place they had known, the place that had known them. The man who delivered fuel oil to my parsonage and parish house in Germany was one such refugee and had been since 1944 or 1945. He asked me once, "So, Herr Pastor, will you go home to America someday?" I answered that I supposed I would, that that was the plan. "It is good to be able to go home," he answered. "My home is now part of Russia. I have not seen it in over forty years. I will *never* be able to go back home." Where do such people go when 'home' is not an option? Where do *we* go?

To avoid death by stoning as an unmarried pregnant girl, and therefore as an adultress, and to protect the Child she was carrying, the Blessed Virgin Mary went to relatives, showing that family still meant something in the ancient land of Israel. But she went to relatives who lived in a completely different region, in the tribal land of Judah, a legal jurisdiction, which the Roman occupying authority called 'Judæa.' This was not like moving from Brogue to Red Lion. It was more like moving from Brogue to Steubenville.

These relatives were respectable people, a Levitical priest and his wife, but they had their own problems. They were very odd for an elderly couple. By means of a pregnancy, once longed for and prayed for, but something on which they had long given up

hope in their old age, the LORD had turned their lives, too, upside down. They would have their son, whom the Archangel said to name 'John,' but it seems, from all Biblical accounts of John the Baptist, that he did not live long enough to produce posterity for Zechariah and Elizabeth. At the center of their lives and in Elizabeth's womb there grew a joy that would fulfill their hope by exceeding and even confounding their expectations. Into such a household Mary of Nazareth was welcomed with joy and protected. Her problem must have hardly seemed to make much difference, under the circumstances.

Within each of us, and in the collective mind of each family at this time of year, there is to be found a small child who has never had a 'perfect'

Christmas but who demands this, like a tiny dictator, pushing us on to achieve the impossible *this* Christmas, at last. In some charmed family circles, æsthetic, culinary, material and even emotional perfection may be closely approximated, though such perfectionist tribes will always expect improvements to come. By this day on the calendar all is in readiness with trimmed tree and cards written, addressed and posted in plenty of time, days of cooking at their penultimate end, the base of the tree festooned with gifts and debt under reasonable control.

For the rest of us, Christmas may come to symbolize our disorganization, and even our family dysfunction, our lack of preparedness for the unexpected family or personal calamity that may make Christmas

on our home fronts seem closer to the surprise chaos of December 7th, 1941, than to the silent and holy night of our worship and our dreams. No one at the inn in Bethlehem had any idea of the event unfolding in the barn out back on the first Christmas, but Zechariah and Elizabeth had a very vivid sense of this nine months before.

But still, they opened their door and their hearts to Mary, and Elizabeth sang and prayed a duet with the Bearer of God incarnate. But? Had the very religious order of their lives not already been overturned by God's interloping would there have been any place, any place on earth, for Jesus' mother, maybe still, maybe not still fiancée of Joseph the Carpenter? We will never know, but this occurs to me, as I hope it

will to you: There may be a heavenly reason for your earthly exasperation if all is not going exactly according to plan this December the 24th. If interruptions have put you behind schedule, take note carefully of the ones for whom you have made time, or those last-minute surprise visitors who have sought you out and found their way to your door. Count yourself blessed as you see in them a blessing, and sing your own hymn of praise for having someone to love and someone who wants and needs your love. Let Elizabeth's and Mary's joy be ours also as we make room for Christ and the Kingdom of God under our own roof and around our Christmas tree, which there is still time to decorate so that it shines gloriously! ✠ Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and has made of us a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. ✠ Amen.



Gloria in Excelsis Deo!