**Sermon 12/23/18**

**Gospel Reading Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)**

Dark clouds churned low over the freeway, dropping torrents of rain.

The wind blew fiercely.

Leaves and fir branches skated along the street.

The windshield wipers ticked steadily, but uselessly,

           just like the agitated thoughts in Margaret's mind.

There was too much to do.

How could she get it all done?

And why bother?

The work of decorating and celebrating Christmas

           was simply too much for busy schedules.

It was an endless list of empty chores, and held little meaning any more.

Each year she skipped another task,

           until she did almost nothing to celebrate Christmas,

           but even the little she did, seemed far too much.

Gone were lights on the house, and the banister greens.

Only a few Christmas cards were sent.

The crèche remained packed away on the top shelf of the closet.

If only they could skip the tree.

And Christmas Eve worship:

        Standing for two hours in an overcrowded church:

               listening to children sing off-key;

               wishing peace to total strangers on cue;

               greeting a wooden Holy Family.

Pointless, senseless, – at least to Margaret.

She taught at a school for Orthodox Jews.

Talk about pointless chores!

Their lives were crammed with them.

Every morning they prayed and studied the Old Testament – the Torah –

            for four hours before starting the standard high school curriculum.

They had nine classes per day, and raced from classroom to classroom.

Every boy with a yarmulke on his head,

             every girl in a long skirt,

             each time kissing their fingers and tapping the mezuzah,

                              a cylinder encasing a tiny prayer scroll,

                           affixed to every doorframe in the school.

Kiss-tap, kiss-tap, kiss-tap.      All day long.

And Jewish holidays! There were so many!

             Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Chanukah.

And each one required time consuming preparations.

All between Labor Day and Christmas!

How did they manage – and why?

As she pulled into the school parking lot,

           and gathered her things for a fast dash through the rain to the school,

           she admitted that the truth was, she envied them.

How wonderful to believe so deeply in God,

            that all those acts seemed meaningful, worth the time and effort.

When she was a teenager,

         she, too, had believed in God, and prayed every night,

         and celebrated the holidays with awe and joy.

No more.

         Earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, floods, bombings;

         shootings in schools, in places of worship, at concerts, at malls;

         poverty, homelessness, hunger, unemployment, hopelessness;

        disease, cancer, heart problems Alzheimer's, drug addiction, alcoholism;

        death, grief, fears, worries.

Margaret simply could not understand God.

Yet her students apparently could.

It never seemed to occur to them that their acts of faith were futile, a waste of time.

            Like Christmas.

"Okay," she said to her class later that morning,

       "Please open your books to chapter five.

At this point in the journal, Eliezer is in the concentration camp.

He has just witnessed the hanging of an innocent Jewish boy.

How did the hanging affect him?"

A hand shot up, and Amira said: "He stopped believing in God."

"That's right," added Nitza, "because later in the chapter

           Eliezer refused to pray on Yom Kippur.

          He had always prayed before."

"And how did he feel about that?" Margaret asked.

"Oh, he says right here," called out Riva, pointing at a page:

           "I was alone – terribly alone; in a world without God.

            I stood amid that praying congregation, observing it like a stranger."

Riva looked up. "Eliezer felt empty, cut off from God."

"He should have prayed anyway," suggested Avraham.

That confused Margaret and she asked:

         “If he didn't believe in God, wouldn't praying have been hypocritical?”

"No," answered Suri. "The Torah tells us to follow

        God's commands and rituals, even when they make no sense.

        It's called Na'aseh V'Nishma – we will act and we will understand.

        First you do the acts, then you will understand God.

       If Eliezer had observed the holiday, he might have recovered some faith."

Margaret stared at her and wondered aloud: "Just like that?"

"Well, you also have to read the Torah to understand the symbolism of the acts,

           Na'aseh V'Nishma.

           First do the acts, then you'll understand God."

The class session ended, but all day Margaret wondered:

Did she have everything backwards?

She had assumed that faith came first, and brought meaning to the acts.

But, maybe, perhaps, meaningful acts came first, and brought faith.

At home she climbed up on the stepstool and pulled out the crèche.

Slowly, methodically, thoughtfully, she arranged the animals and the people.

It was the first real act of celebrating Christmas for a long time.

Later that evening she located the old family Bible on the bookshelf.

She pulled it out and brushed the dust off.

She sat down and began to read:

**In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth …**

Each night, as pointless as it might seem, and as little as she understood,

she opened the Bible and read a little more.

**See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way,**

**and the Lord whom you seek will come to his temple.**

And he did come – that night at the Christmas Eve Worship Service,

          as the children sang like angels, and the people prayed for hope and peace.

She did not wait for faith and understanding before acting.

         Na'aseh V'Nishma.

        She acted and began to understand.

Often, when God speaks, we do not understand.

The acts he wants us to do can seem pointless, and not worth the effort.

Jesus came into our darkness to show us a whole new way of life – God's way.

**Whoever has two coats, share with anyone who has none.**

**Whoever has food do likewise.**

**Love your neighbor.**

**Forgive others.**

**Pray for those who have hurt you.**

Difficult?              Yes!           At times all but impossible.

But we will act, and in acting we will understand.

When it all seems pointless,

        and lacking in meaning,

                  and too much trouble,

                            we will do the acts anyway.

Mary did not understand all that would happen in her life,

          as she obeyed God, and gave birth to Jesus.

But she accepted her role in God's plan,

          and hurried to Elizabeth to share the amazing news.

She accepted and acted, and gradually, throughout her life,

          she began to understand and experience God's ways.

It is especially important that we do the acts of God

             when we cannot feel his presence.

We can:

            Pray in the silence.

          Worship in the emptiness.

           Read Scripture when it seems to lack meaning.

          Share what we have when it seems to be all but nothing.

           Do the acts of faith and love,

                                even if we do not feel them.

And so we come to the stable

regardless of how we feel and what is happening in our lives.

We consider the shepherds and wisemen even if we do not understand.

We spend a few moments with Mary and Joseph and the Christ Child.

We are God's people.

                      We will act.

                                And in acting we will understand.

AMEN