

“Always Pregnant, Ever Giving Birth”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
IV Advent – 20 December 2015
Luke 1:39-55

Quick show of hands, but before I ask the question, let me explain how we’re going to do this. It’s going to work revival-style. Now for those who didn’t grow up with revivals as some of us did, these were three or four-night sing-a-thon, prayer-a-thon, and preach-a-thons designed to save souls. And near the end of this two or three-hour emotional roller coaster ride, there would be an altar call, and if you felt Jesus knocking on the door of your heart, you could walk down that aisle and pray a little prayer with the preacher and all would be well with your soul for the rest of the your life.

But before the altar call started, the preacher would take a little informal poll, and to encourage the shy and prevent embarrassment, he would say, “With every head bowed, and every eye closed, raise your hand in the air if you feel that Jesus wants to come into your heart tonight.” As a child, it was terribly tempting to peek, and I did, twice, but I won’t tell you what I saw. And of course, it was clever, offering this opportunity to raise your hand in safe anonymity, because from an emotional standpoint, that raised hand was the first step down the aisle.

Before I turned 18, I raised my hand, walked down the aisle, prayed the prayer, and got saved more times than I can remember. You lose count after a while, but every time it was a sincere, devout experience, a mixture of terrible dread of hellfire and exuberant joy at the prospect of everlasting peace and life. Except once, when nobody was walking down the aisle, and the preacher wasn’t going to give up until he’d saved a soul, and I was about to go crazy, because there are only so many times a man can sing the final verse of “Just as I Am.”

So with every head bowed and every eye closed, and no peeking, because Jesus will know, how many people have experienced heightened levels of pressure, stress, busyness, helplessness, or apprehension over the past week? OK, God bless you. You can put your hands down now. And with every head still bowed and every eye still closed, how many people enjoyed a peaceful, tranquil, unhurried, worry-free week? OK, put your hands down. God bless you, and Shelley, write their names down, because I want to know their secret. You can open your eyes and raise your heads, unless sermon-time is your naptime, in which case, Shelley, write their names down.

For many of us, this time of year is intense. You've got parties to host and attend, presents to choose and wrap and perhaps mail, decorations to put up, travel plans, which involve packing and leaving home and invariably forgetting something, or you might be preparing to receive out-of-town guests, which means cleaning and cooking, and then there's worship to attend, and several other things I've probably forgotten, because there's just too much to remember.

Let's all take a deep breath. Just expel all the air out of your lungs, and slowly inhale and let it go. There's you go. Let's do it again. Ah, it reminds of Lamaze class, where you learn how to control your breathing as a couple, to help the mother-to-be give birth and help keep the father-to-be from passing out in the delivery room.

Of course, Elizabeth and Mary didn't have the benefit of Lamaze classes or delivery rooms or doctors or nurses or epidurals. Yet they experienced the same joy and excitement and the same crushing sense of rapid, impending change as any other child-bearing woman. However, the baby boys they carried were quite different from any the world has seen, before or since, different from any the world will ever see again.

In Elizabeth's womb lay a boy would grow up to be John the Baptizer. He leapt in her womb when Mary came close, somehow aware that Mary carried a child who would be named Jesus. John would pave the way for Jesus, calling people to repent, to turn their lives around, because John, even in utero, knew that Jesus would turn the world around, and John wanted people to be ready for that. Mary and Elizabeth knew this, too. It has been revealed to them, through angelic messengers and marvelous signs and wonders.

Elizabeth professed of Mary, "blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord," and this comment sparked a response from Mary, as lyrical as it is radical. Mary praised God for a Holy power and majesty shown throughout history, a history littered with princes deposed and ordinary, lowly people, like Mary, being lifted up, often in unusual ways. And that song of praise was also a song of prophesy, because everything Mary described God doing was going to be done in a new way by her son, by God's Son. Jesus would overturn everything cruel and unjust in the world, fulfilling the promises of God, given for countless generations.

And on Thursday, and the twelve days afterwards, we will celebrate and give thanks and praise for the literal emergence of that new world order, as we pause in the midst of our tense busyness to reflect on the wonder of God delivered into the world to dwell among us as a helpless baby. And whether it is the first or the seventy-fifth time you've had the privilege to honor his arrival, there is a sense of joy, anchored in the confidence we rightly place in God's promise. Although the mission of peace and love launched by the first cry of that newborn in Bethlehem has not yet been completed, it is somehow mysteriously fulfilled. Indeed, "blessed [are they] who believe that there [has been] a fulfillment of what was spoken to [us]," and given to us, "by the Lord."

For nothing – no idea, word, or action – can put that baby back in the womb. Nothing can silence his wisdom. Nothing can stop his healing power. Nothing can keep him off the cross or in the tomb. For Jesus has come to be among us, and he remains among us still, through the power of the Holy Spirit, in the word and in the bread and wine. In every person who calls him Lord, Jesus has made a home to dwell, and every time we praise him – in song, in prayer, as an active witness to his love – the fullness he brought comes closer to completion, the mission he started comes closer to fruition, as the world gradually, person by person, becomes a kinder place, a more merciful place.

In fact, every day, no matter how packed with distraction and frustration, is pregnant with the everlasting life and peace of Jesus. Inside each of us is a little John, ready to leap at the chance to recognize Jesus in our midst, ready to prepare the way by preparing people for the One who has come and will someday return. Inside each of us is a little Jesus, giving us a radiant glow, eager to be sent forth, to be let loose into a world that yearns to believe. We are all spiritually pregnant, and in a spiritual pregnancy, the crowning achievement need not be delayed for nine months. It can happen any day, every day, if we inhale that rushing, calming breath of the Spirit, and then send it forth into the world.

Given recent events, it may be more difficult this year to embrace that joy. It may feel difficult to believe that Mary's pregnancy truly resulted in a world forever changed for the better. That's all the more reason, though, to take comfort in Jesus, for it is in the tough times that belief transforms us most, opening new perspective on what has been and what can be.

For on Thursday, everything changes, if we let it. On Thursday, a new King will be born. Thursday the invincible power of God will be unleashed upon us anew, bursting forth like a babe from the womb. And it shall not be a transient thing, to be swept away like torn wrapping paper

and bent bows and twisted ribbons. It shall not be a passing thing, like the rigors of travel or hospitality. This pregnant moment shall endure, as it has endured, as the definitive moment in history, the definitive moment in our lives, when God brought forth into the world a newness that will never grow old, a life that will never die, a way of life that will forever show forth the glory of a God determined to bring peace of Earth and good will to all who will bear it. Amen.