

Advent IV, Year C
December 24, 2006
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I had been on the road for four days driving from Maine to California with my father. We were averaging 600 miles a day, and were tired of sitting in the car for hours on end in the midst of beautiful summer days. We pulled into the McDonalds parking lot for yet another fast food lunch thankful that the rush of drivers grabbing a quick bite to eat was starting to ease. We parked in a spot right near the dumpster and coaxed our stiff bodies out of the car, stretching the hundreds of miles of stiffness out of our limbs. And there, in the midst of a McDonald's parking lot paved with hot blacktop, was a tomato plant, and what's more a ripe red tomato hanging from its vine. Somehow, in the midst of blacktop a tomato seed had fallen from a sandwich, found its way into a crack in the parking lot and life had burst forth in a setting which had no resemblance to a tomato garden. I stood on that pavement looking at that tomato plant and was simply amazed by the tenacity and power of life. How wonderful to see life coming forth and bearing fruit in the midst of a barren commercial landscape. From that tomato seed the life that God had given to that tomato plant was shining forth, demonstrating the power of life, demonstrating the power of God acting through common, everyday events to bring forth uncommon, unexpected results.

Both the lessons from the prophet Micah and the Gospel of Luke point our eyes on this Christmas Eve morning to look for God acting in common places in unexpected ways. Throughout the reading from Micah is the image of a restored and reinvigorated Israel. That may not sound unexpected to us, but we need to consider Micah's historical situation. As Micah was writing Israel was falling prey to powerful nations which were sweeping through the land, conquering small nations and sending the people to exile. For years Israel had seen its Monarchy stumble, both politically and spiritually, ever looking back with longing eyes to the reign of King David. And yet, in the midst of this political gloom Micah speaks of a new king who shall lead, and shepherd Israel. A new king, born of the city of David, who shall be the king of peace and who shall be known in all the ends of the earth. The shocking and unexpected fact in all of this is that this great shepherd king will come, not from a mighty city, not from the great kingly citadel of Jerusalem, but instead from a forgettably small backwater town, the town of Bethlehem. From this common place Micah prophesied that God would choose the lowly to do the unimaginable, to restore life to Israel. God would take the common, the forgotten of the world, and bring about startling, life giving, results.

In the same way our Gospel reading is filled with God choosing the forgotten, the common, the powerless, to do unexpectedly great things. Think for just a moment about the two main characters of the Gospel reading, Elizabeth and Mary. To begin with the obvious, both of these characters were women, people afforded no power or status in the first century Roman or Palestinian world. Secondly, both of these women came from common families. Neither of them belonged to a powerful family, neither of them lived in beautiful houses with servants at their beck and call. Instead they were common women, living in a backwater section of the great Roman Empire. Additionally, one of these women, Mary, had become pregnant out of wedlock, and had rushed away from her home to visit with her relative and to share in her joy and fear at this unexpected event. Nothing about these circumstances merited any dreams of greatness, and yet, God was acting in the lives of these common women in unexpected and earth-shaking ways.

Elizabeth, the one who had been unable to conceive a child, was in her sixth month of pregnancy, a pregnancy announced to her husband and her by the Angel Gabriel. What is more, ever since the announcement that she would bear John the Baptist, who was the forerunner to the Messiah, her husband had been mute. There is no question that these were unexpected occurrences found in the midst of common lives.

And then there was Mary, she may have been pregnant outside of wedlock, but this was no typical out-of-wedlock pregnancy. She too had been visited by Gabriel and had been told that God was doing something through her that would be remembered to the end of the ages. And in her joy, excitement, and fear she ran to see her relative, to share the story, to share the news that God was doing the unexpected in the midst of her, until then, common life.

But that isn't the end of God's surprising action in the midst of common human life. The moment that Mary arrived John the Baptist, only six months in the womb, unable to see, hear or feel anything outside of his mother's womb leapt for joy at the arrival of Mary, the God-Bearer. John leapt at the sound of Mary's voice, at the presence of the one who would bring the Messiah, the one who would throw down rulers from their thrones, lift up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things while sending the rich away empty. John leapt for joy and both Elizabeth and Mary broke into song, rejoicing that God had come to the common of the world to do incredibly uncommon, life changing, world-transforming things.

God acting in the midst of the common, in unexpected ways does not only occur in these readings. God's unexpected actions in the midst of common life fills the Bible, from the words of Exodus, to the story of Hannah and Samuel and David. Our God is a God who acts through small things to do great deeds. This belief that God is acting in the common world in powerful and unexpected ways is part and parcel of the Christian life. Our calling is to see God's action and to rejoice in it just as Mary, Elizabeth, and John did on that day so many years ago. Our calling today, as we prepare to celebrate one of the greatest uncommon acts of God, the incarnation of the Christ Child in a humble manger, is to discern where it is that God is acting in our common lives. Where are tomato plants bearing fruit in the midst of desolate parking lots? Where are relationships that had been broken being healed? Where are the hungry being fed and the poor being clothed and cared for? Where is it that God is calling us to be part of God's uncommon action in the midst of a common and broken world?

My dear friends in Christ, where is it that God is stirring new life and hope in the smallest of situations with the most unbelievable results in your lives? Stop and think as we sit here, on the cusp of Christmas Eve, where it is that God is acting in your life to bring about joy, new life, and new hope. How has God done things for you and for others in the past and the present that created new life, a life filled with rejoicing at the action of our loving God? This one thing is sure, God *is* acting right now, in this place, acting in the midst of common human life to do uncommon things, to bring about new hope, new life, new joy.

May we be blessed with the ability to perceive God's action as did Mary, Elizabeth, and John and then to join in the celebration of God's doing good things for us. Mary's song is to become our song, "The Almighty has done great things for me" the Almighty has done great things for us. Amen.