

WHY BETHLEHEM? WHY MARY? WHY ELIZABETH? WHY ME?
A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year C, December 20, 2009
Text: Luke 1:39-45

“And Elizabeth said, ‘And why has this happened to me?’”

In the name of Jesus. Amen.

I think the most profound insult I ever suffered was this:

My senior year of high school I was a student at Interlochen Arts Academy. I played in the orchestra, sang in the choir, sang in Ken Jewell’s madrigal group. Around Christmas, we were going to perform Bach’s *Magnificat*. Students were invited to audition for the solo parts.

I summoned my courage and tried out to sing a challenging tenor solo, “*Deposuit*”—he has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

No one else was trying out for that solo, so I thought I had a shot. . . . But the conductor decided they would rather omit that movement than have me sing it.

That took me down a few notches. Talk about bringing down the powerful from their thrones! My only consolation was that the girl who tried out to sing the “*Esurientes*” received the same treatment. So the *Magnificat* was performed that time without bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly; without filling the hungry with good things or sending the rich away empty.

The *Magnificat*, which we sang as our psalm this morning, is in some ways the theme song of the Gospel of Luke. It is a song about the wonderful works of God, by which God has saved his servant Israel. Like some other psalms in the Old Testament, it speaks with hope about things that we believe God *will* do as if they have already been done.

The psalm is very much like the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel. Hannah was in a situation very much like Elizabeth’s, and partly for that reason many people believe this song was originally attributed to Elizabeth rather than Mary.

But the point it makes is a very general one about God’s salvation, even if here it is meant to express the joy of Mary, and of Elizabeth, at what God is doing in them, not just that Elizabeth is honored by Mary’s visiting her.

God has singled them out. In a wonderful way.

So Elizabeth says, and I think that for the author it applies to all that God is doing in Luke, “*Why* has this happened to me?” Or, “Why has this happened to me?” Or, “Why has this happened to me?”

We are used to hearing a similar question, or asking it ourselves: “Why me?” as in “Why should this bad thing happen to me, instead of someone else?” Here, it is the opposite: “Why should something so wonderful happen to me?”

Now, there is a myth in our culture called “Cinderella,” and the answer in Cinderella is not the same as the answer here. In Cinderella, the wicked stepsisters try to present themselves falsely as deserving a wonderful fate. One of *them* should be chosen to marry the prince, and to live

happily ever after. So they try to force their foot into the glass slipper, but of course it doesn't fit, and in the end the glass slipper fits Cinderella, who, although she didn't have really fine clothes and all, was really a very wonderful, kind, generous, long-suffering, virtuous individual, who in fact really *did* deserve to have something terrific happen to her, so (luckily) her slender foot fit the glass slipper and the prince chose her for his bride and *they* lived happily ever after.

Why did something wonderful happen to Cinderella? Because she was wonderful. Moral of the story: be wonderful, be patient, and Prince Charming *may* find you and you *may* get what you deserve.

That is not at all what happened here. Both Elizabeth and Mary were honestly puzzled that God would choose them, that God would do great things for them. When the angel told Mary that she would be the mother of the one who would save his people from their sins, she did not say "I have always felt special, and now I know why!" When Elizabeth learned from her husband that she would finally have a baby, she did not exclaim "Well, it's about time God did something right!"

The answer to *why* God blessed Elizabeth and Mary and did great things for them, was not that God finally figured out who the really nice people were and rewarded them, but that it is in the nature of God to be gracious and merciful, to befriend those who call upon him, to rescue those who need his help. They had been blessed because of who God is, how God is. And they would now play vital roles in God's saving his people Israel, not because Israel was so cool, but because Israel's God was almighty and merciful, one who listens to the cry of his people. Like Bethlehem of Ephrathah, "one of the little clans of Judah," God was going to do something mighty good through them, to save us all.

And he would do it in the most amazing way, by giving himself in the form of a little baby, who would grow up do something mighty not by doing something mighty but by surrendering his own life to give us life.

I have always listened to the Magnificat as a recitation of mighty deeds. I loved the verbs: He has shown strength, scattered the proud, brought down the powerful, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry, sent the rich away empty—lots of drama there. When you are really down, you might take some comfort in reckoning that God will fix a lot of people's wagons in the end.

But this time around, the words from the Magnificat that have reverberated for me all week long are the simple words "for me."

As in, "The Mighty One has done great things . . . **for me!**" The sentence reminds me of Luther's explanation of the second article of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, **is my Lord!**" Or the Nicene Creed's second article, "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. **For us** and **for our salvation** he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary and became truly human. **For our sake** he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he

suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.” All that, **for little old us**.

Our faith is not a list of things we think. It is a conviction that all the fuss about Jesus, his being born, his suffering, his dying, his rising, his ascending—it was all **for us**, for every one of us.

To forget that, to forget how personal it was and remains, would be like drawing a picture of “The Good Shepherd” but leaving out the sheep. To remember that is to know the dimensions of God’s love for us. Amen.

