

Deep Joy

“For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.” –Luke 1.44

There is something quiet and understated about this morning’s texts from the Gospel of Luke. They seem very appropriate for this particular morning: the fourth Sunday of Advent being celebrated on December 24. These texts are like the hush before the hustle and bustle of Christmas Eve. Tonight we’ll be focused on big dramatic events—shepherds seeing angels in the heavens and traveling far to see the baby. This morning’s happenings are of a smaller scale: two pregnant women greeting each other, an expectant mother singing a song.

The tone of these different parts of the story could have something to do with the gender of the key characters. Now, I don’t like to indulge in gender stereotyping, but it does seem that often women do things more quietly than men. At our house, I know that my son John rarely startles me, as he sounds like a herd of elephants coming down the stairs. My daughter, on the other hand, can glide down with barely a sound. More than once she’s caught me by surprise and given me a start! That’s sort of how I see those shepherds—noisily tromping down the stairs to greet the Christ child. The world couldn’t help but take notice. But Mary and Elizabeth, they are involved in something more subtle. And this morning it is that “something” that I’d like us to share.

When Mary goes to visit her “kinswoman,” Elizabeth, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb “leapt for joy.” It is a wonderful scene of domestic life. As readers of the whole story, we know that the leaping baby is John the Baptist, who will later be finding other ways to announce the arrival of his cousin the savior. But for now it is a gentle moment of commonality, shared between these two mothers.

As a man, I don’t know much about being pregnant, but I do remember feeling a baby’s kick from the outside. It is an amazing thing! As hard as pregnancy is, in many ways, I know

that many women look back on it as a treasured and special time. There is something very powerful about bearing life from within. The joy of that kicking baby is a deep joy, not just a superficial happiness.

The season of Advent invites us into this deep joy. It is not a noisy season of the church year. We have to listen hard to catch the sound of the candles flickering. There are no trumpets yet—not until tonight. Right now the call is to listen, to feel, to experience something deep.

In an odd sort of way, these texts got me thinking about swimming. (Of all things to think about in December!) How many of the kids here this morning know how to swim? Could you tell me some of the differences between swimming under water and swimming on the surface of the water? (Quieter, smoother, more peaceful?) I think Advent is a season that is like swimming under the water. It brings special pleasures, but they are peaceful pleasures, not jubilant pleasures. Nevertheless, they teach us about joy. Deep joy.

The Christian tradition is always calling us to find the deeper joy of life. We are all too happy to live life on the surface—splashing around, making a lot of noise, making grand movements that can be seen by others. But God wants us to have a life deeper than that—a quiet place, deep down, where we can experience some peace and quiet...enough, perhaps, to feel the kick of a baby. Pascal wrote, “A trifle consoles us because a trifle upsets us.”¹ To me, that is one of the great indictments of life lived without depth. When we are not tied down to something deep, we are easily upset and quickly flustered.

Mary and Elizabeth had much about which to be flustered, but somehow they discovered faith and trust in their very depths. And even after all of the drama of the birth itself, Mary found her way back to that place. I like Eugene Peterson’s loose translation of the familiar words we’ll hear at the end of this evening’s Gospel: “Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself.”

Christ was born. Christ is born. Christ will be born. Remember. Celebrate. Hope. And hold the thought dear, deep within yourself.

¹ *Pensees*, number 43.