

## SPG#116, Advent 4C

December 24, 2006 – Fr. Charles Pope

Micah 5:2-5a

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-55

The figures in today's gospel are not what you would call stars of the show. Their importance comes in their supporting roles toward the birth of Jesus. They are Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptizer. And they each are indicative of other figures in supporting roles such as Mary's husband, Joseph, and John the Baptizer himself. This group, as a whole, was prone to visions and unusual occurrences.

Mary, as you know, was visited by an angel and told that she would bear the Christ child.

Her response is the legendary Magnificat which is part of today's readings. Joseph also was visited by an angel and told to go ahead and take Mary as his wife.

We have no recorded accounts of John the Baptizer having visions. But the life of this son of Zechariah and Elizabeth was an unusual occurrence in itself. He was obsessed with preparing the world for the coming of the Christ, the Anointed One. His father, before John was born, was also visited by an angel to announce John's birth. When Zechariah questioned how he was to be named, Zechariah was temporarily blinded.

Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John, in today's gospel, is visited by Mary. Elizabeth says that the baby leaped in her womb when the two women met.

This meeting of the two women has become known as the Visitation. It speaks to the anticipation and expectation of birth times two. I must admit that it is one of my favorites. The feast day for the Visitation is May 31, the day of my ordination to priesthood.

If we take this group as a whole, Mary, Elizabeth, John the Baptizer, Zechariah, and Joseph, we see visitations by angels, people going blind, and babies leaping in the womb. And I have often

thought that if a whole life were given over to visions and unusual occurrences the resulting personality would be something like John the Baptizer. But on the whole, we have a cast of characters who ironically assume a prominence because of their supporting roles.

In these people, and later in the lives of the apostles, we find the beginning of a tradition around the presence of Jesus Christ. We find more people assuming a prominence because of a supporting role. Many of them, like our five today, would have visions and unusual occurrences as well. And some of those are recorded. But many followers of Jesus Christ also took on a supporting role, but never achieved a public prominence. In fact, many of them are unknown to this day. Eventually this devotion to the supporting role would be called servanthood. And there have been millions, prominent and unknown, who with hearts full of joy, were grateful to be called servants. In our own Episcopal Church the ordained ministry of Deacons is a ministry of servanthood and service.

And so we find in history the servanthood of one is founded and built on the servanthood of another. And all of them are built on the Servant of all servants. There is a place in our hearts and in many places across the earth where servants regularly give of themselves in supporting roles. And in this place there is always a call for any who would serve, for any who would be a servant.

It is called the Church. And in the Church we are called to serve based on the servanthood of others that our work might be the support for yet other servants.

Outside the Body of Christ this phenomenon of self giving and sacrifice is outrageous nonsense. And for some, even in the Church, it is outrageous nonsense.

But in the heart of a true servant will be found the reward of working in a supporting role.

It is the warmth and love of God, the presence of Christ. The work of such persons is like a perfumed fragrance in our lives. This church is blessed with many servants. Some of their servanthood is visible. Some of it is not.

In my own life, as I take stock of my own servanthood, I feel gratified that God has found cause to use my gifts in the area of mental health and in the church to form a servanthood here in Grinnell. At other times I marvel that in spite of my foolishness and inadequacy he gives birth to servanthood.

And that causes me to think of a pitfall in being a servant. In the middle ages it became common for people of faith to demean themselves, and in some cases, to abuse themselves, so that they would appear as a servant of God. And since that time many have punished themselves and berated themselves in the interest of whipping themselves into a servanthood. And that really is self abuse. And yet, that legacy lives on with many who suffer in silent abusive torment because of the way they think about themselves.

As God draws near to one of us and calls us into a servanthood there is a love and an affirming of that person. We are reminded of our own preciousness in God's sight.

It is out of that love, being able to see ourselves as God sees us that we can joyfully serve in a supporting role.

On the other end of the confused spectrum will be found those who try to pump up their self esteem so they can attain to the status of servant. Servanthood, positions in life, come as a result of the realization of self importance. By contrast God calls us to see the truth about ourselves. He calls us to see how we tear ourselves down. He calls us to see how we inflate our own importance. He calls us to the truth.

God will take a servant just as they are. Deep inside beats the heart of a true servant. There is no pretense about being worthless or being arrogant. There is a humanity and a truth about who that person is. It is you. It is me.

Do you think there is servanthood in the activity of an arrogant person? Yes indeed. And often it is not pretty. But service occurs. Do you think there is servanthood in the activity of a person who feels worthless? Yes indeed. And often it is not pretty. But service occurs. For many of us we do not know the way out of the forest of arrogance.

For many of us we do not know the way out of the entanglements of worthlessness.

And servanthood is never perfect. But true servanthood is always blessed by God. And as much as we build on the work of others, still others will build on our less than perfect servanthood.

And so we give ourselves to God as best we can. That was true for Mary, Elizabeth, John, and the rest.

For Mary, Elizabeth, and John their servanthood pointed to and was oriented around the coming of the Messiah. And that really is our acid test as well. The most important question is not are we too arrogant? The most important question is not do we feel too worthless? The most important question is does our service point to Jesus Christ?

As we approach Bethlehem and the manger that is an important question. And as we stand around him whom we serve, let us be reminded that a call to servanthood is always a call to joy, a call to fulfillment. And always remember that each of us is created in God's image. That each of us is precious in his sight. I close today with the words of a true servant, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior." Amen.