

A sermon delivered by
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The Church of the Transfiguration
1 East 29th Street, New York, NY
Sunday, December 20, 2009
Fourth Sunday of Advent

[Micah 5:2-4](#)
[Hebrews 10:5-10](#)
[Luke 1:39-49\(50-56\)](#)
[Psalm 80 or 80:1-7](#)

Introduction

Today is my birthday. I am 35 years old. Friday was Fr. Clair's birthday. I won't tell you how old he is. That would be impolite, but you can find it in today's bulletin. What I will tell you, though, is that it is very hard to grow up with a birthday so close to Christmas. Only 5 days out from what may be the biggest holiday of the year, very few are thinking about birthday parties and gifts. When it comes to gifts, it is easy to be short changed. I remember one year my mother said, "Just go pick one gift from under the tree. That'll be your birthday present." Parents don't do that. By the time I was a teenager I had figured out how to capitalize on this unfortunate birth date. I would choose one item...one BIGGGGG item...and ask my parents to make it both my birthday and Christmas present. And it worked. I'll never forget the December I received a 6-disc CD changer for my car way back in 1992. That's when it really paid off! But gifts are not what this season is all about – that is secondary. The primary focus is on birth – new life.

Just last week I received a phone call from Ed, my best friend from childhood. He had wonderful news to share: his new wife, Tamara, is pregnant with their first child. I was struck by the level of joy I felt from that phone call. I even teared up a bit. The announcement of new life inspires awe. She is pregnant; she is expecting. And that is where we meet Mary today in the Gospel, on the 4th Sunday of Advent. She is pregnant, expecting.

Let me give you some context. The first chapter of Luke moves from the Annunciation to the Visitation to the Magnificat.

Annunciation – Gabriel's announcement to Mary that she will bear a son and name him Jesus is the annunciation. The Church celebrates the feast of the Annunciation on March 25th each year. Can anyone guess why? It is 9 months before December 25, the birth of Christ.

Visitation – The visitation is Mary's visit to Elizabeth, and we heard that narrative just moments ago. What is stunning about the visitation is that we have two women who biologically cannot get pregnant. Elizabeth is an old, barren woman; Mary is a young virgin woman. The message is that if you are willing to be a vessel for the life-giving power and love of God, then nothing will stand in the way. I'm reminded of the Apostle Paul's words to the Romans: "I am convinced that

neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God,” – and I will take the liberty of adding the life-giving power of God – “which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”¹

Magnificat – The *magnificat* is Mary’s song of praise. It is named Magnificat after the Latin word in the first line, “My soul *magnifies* the Lord.” The Greek word translated *magnifies* comes from a word that sounds like “mega,” as in Mega-millions. It literally means to enlarge, to exalt, to make great, to hold in high esteem, or to magnify. I’m glad *magnify* was the translation that became part of the Church’s tradition. I like that image because it is evocative. One thing it brings to mind is the joke inherent within Mary’s song. She herself is being magnified, or enlarged, because she is pregnant. She’s getting bigger! She’s being magnified. So in return she will magnify God, hold him in high esteem.

A pregnant Lutheran blogger recently brought to my attention that there is no talk in Luke about Mary’s 9 months of pregnancy. She says, “We go straight from the virgin getting the good news to the blissful mother — with none of the ankle-swelling, nausea or backaches in between.”²

Maybe that is because, we, the Church, live that period of pregnancy during the season of Advent. The season of Advent is a season of expectancy, a time of ankle-swelling, nausea, and backaches for us. Mary is a symbol of the Church. She is not the only who is pregnant right now – about to bring new life into the world. We, the Church, are pregnant in the season of Advent. There is something stirring within us, something kicking us from within urging us to pay attention to it, urging us to nurture it. The season of Advent is a period of discernment.

I ask you this question: what is kicking within you? What is causing you nausea? What is keeping you up at night? New life is growing within you (and me) and I urge you to pay attention to it. In other words, what is God announcing to you? What new life will God bring into this world through you and your ministry? The same could be asked of us as a community here at the Little Church.

Let me share with you what’s been kicking around within me lately by way of a story:

I’d like you to meet Prudence. She is a 24 year-old mother of three from a village in Cameroon. After suffering 3 days of agonizing labor a midwife sat on her stomach to try and expedite the delivery. Instead, she ruptured her uterus. Hoping to save the baby, Prudence’s family found someone to drive her 75 miles to the hospital...on a motorcycle. After she arrived she was left untreated in a hospital room for more than two days. The now-dead fetus was rotting inside her swollen belly. Prudence became weaker and weaker, and needed a blood transfusion to save her life. There were only two people at the hospital that had compatible blood types. One was an American reporter named Nick, and he eagerly rolled up his sleeve. Prudence had to have an emergency C-section to remove the decaying baby from her body. The doctor refused to operate unless someone paid him \$100. Nick paid the fee, but the doctor decided to go home for the night. The next morning Nick found Prudence lying in her own vomit with her urine bag

¹ Romans 8:38-39

² http://www.thelutheran.org/article/article_buy.cfm?article_id=8660

overflowing. The doctor finally performed the operation and there seemed to be a glimmer of hope. But then she slipped into a coma, and without antibiotics, infection raged throughout her body. The journalist wrote, “Her case particularly moved me because I was there and my blood was in her veins. I thought maybe she would pull through. But her ferocious will to live wasn’t enough. Prudence Lemokouno, R.I.P.”³

In much of the world, the most dangerous thing a woman can do is to become pregnant. An African woman has one chance in twenty of dying in pregnancy. Around the world, every minute a woman dies in pregnancy and labor. That’s equivalent to five jumbo jets filled with women dying every day. A similar case to Prudence’s took place in Niger, except the woman lived because of a \$42 birthing kit that was made available to her.

That American reporter, Nick, was recently on the Oprah Winfrey Show. His full name is Nicholas Kristof. He and his wife, Sheryl WuDunn, are the first married couple to win a Pulitzer Prize in journalism. They’ve written a book called *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* which is being hailed as the manifesto of our times.⁴ The title comes from a Chinese proverb that says, “Women hold up half the sky.” They make the claim that the oppression of women worldwide is the human rights cause of our time. Their book focuses on four appalling realities: maternal mortality, sexual violence, and lack of education and economic opportunities for women. Here are some more statistics and factoids:

- More women are likely to be maimed or killed by male violence than by cancer, malaria, traffic accidents and war combined
- More girls have been discriminated against to death in the last 50 years than all the men who died in all the wars of the twentieth-century.

What is the solution? Kristof and WuDunn refer to the *girl effect*, which is defined as the “powerful social and economic change brought about when girls have the opportunity to participate.”⁵

- For every development dollar spent, a girl only receives less than two cents.
- A girl will reinvest 90% of her income into her family; a man will reinvest 30-40%.
- An extra year of primary school raises a girl's lifetime wages by 10-20%.
- An extra year of secondary school raises a girl's lifetime wages by 15-25%.
- Research in developing countries has shown that children of educated mothers are more likely to be healthy and educated themselves.
- When girls have received 7 or more years of education they marry 4 years later and have 2.2 fewer children.⁶

³ The story of Prudence and the statistics that follow were taken almost verbatim from The Oprah Winfrey Show featuring Kristof and WuDunn which aired on 12/02/09. You may access the transcript here:

http://www.livedash.com/transcript/oprah_winfrey/714/KGO/Wednesday_December_2_2009/115743/

You may also read about Prudence in a New York Times article found here:

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/08/books/08nussbaum.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all

⁴ <http://www.halftheskymovement.org/>

⁵ www.girleffect.org

⁶ These six facts are from www.girleffect.org/

Lawrence Summers, as chief economist of the World Bank said, “Investment in girl’s education may well be the highest return investment available in the developing world.”⁷ The best way to fight poverty and extremism is to educate and empower women and girls.⁸

When I hear these stories and alarming statistics, I can’t help but be reminded of the second half of the Magnificat: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” Fred Craddock writes, “What God has done for Mary anticipates and models what God will do for the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed of the world.”⁹ These are the reasons for the seasons of Advent and Christmas: peace and justice. The problems I’ve mentioned are solvable. And God solves the world’s problems by impregnating His Church with new life.

Conclusion

So, again, I ask: what’s kicking around within you this Advent season? What are you discerning? How is God calling you to participate in the redemption of the world? And, since today is my birthday, I’ll go ahead and tell you what gift I’d like to receive. In fact, you can make it for both my birthday and Christmas. Do something – anything – to empower a woman somewhere in the world today. That would be nothing short of magnificent.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Half the Sky Movement

<http://www.halftheskymovement.org/>

This is the web site for Kristof and WuDunn’s movement that stems from their book. Visit it to read more personal stories of women around the world and find ways to empower and educate them.

KIVA

<http://www.kiva.org/>

KIVA is the world’s first person-to-person micro-lending website, empowering individuals to lend to unique entrepreneurs around the globe. Read a woman’s story and lend her as little as \$25 to help her change her life, and her community’s.

Episcopal Relief and Development

<http://www.er-d.org/>

Rather than impose “one size fits all” solutions, Episcopal Relief & Development supports local, long-term initiatives that address poverty, hunger, disease, economic development and disaster response where the need is greatest. Get involved or donate to them today.

⁷ <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/23/magazine/23Women-t.html?pagewanted=5#>

⁸ www.halftheskymovement.org

⁹ <http://www.amazon.com/Interpretation-Bible-Commentary-Teaching-Preaching/dp/0804231230> Quoted from page 29.