

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
November 17, 2013

Luke 1:39-56; Matthew 11:2-11
“Are you the one who is to come...?”

The second reading today is the one designated by the Revised Common Lectionary. After reading it, I could not help recalling an earlier passage where John and Jesus connect in the womb. Then, I visited the office copy room and looked at the painting on the wall by Leonardo De Vinci where the John and Jesus are together as small children.

I shall recount these episodes as “back story” and then go to the heart of this sermon, indicated by the sermon title.

The first story is one of my favorites. It is exquisite. The mothers, Mary and Elizabeth, reconnect after a long absence, both are pregnant, and when they greet each other, the babies in their wombs connect as well. Elizabeth says, “And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.”

The words by Elizabeth signify the significance of the baby carried by Mary. It is Jesus, the founder of our faith and our Lord and Savior. It is God incarnate.

Renowned German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, retells the story in poetic form. Since I am integrating poetry and scripture this Advent, I shall read his poem now. You may follow along. It is in an insert.

Mary’s Visitation

At the outset, she still carried it quite well
but already, from time to time, when climbing, she
became aware of the marvel of her belly, –
and then she stood, caught breath, up on the high

Judean hills. It was not the land
but her abundance that spread out around her;
going on she felt: you couldn’t have more than
the largess that she now perceived.

And it urged her to lay her hand
on the other belly, which was heavier.
And the women swayed toward each other
and touched each other’s garb and hair.

Each, filled with her sanctified possession,
 had the protection of a woman friend.
 In her, the Saviour still was a bud intact,
 but the Baptist in the womb of her "aunt"
 already leapt, seized with delight.

The Da Vinci painting shows Jesus sitting on the lap of his mother who is sitting with her mother Anne and John is leaning on them. The interesting aspect of this picture is the baby Jesus blessing John and Anne pointing to heaven. It is a magnificent De Vinci-type picture and like the Rilke poem is enveloped in holiness.

[Walk down the center aisle with the picture in a show-and-tell]

Having this amazing sense of the relationship of Jesus and John and the narratives of John's admiration of Jesus at his baptism, it is surprising in the latter gospel reading today to hear that John questions whether in fact Jesus is the one to come – the Messiah. He sends his disciples to Jesus with this message: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" There is nothing like tension in a great story and Matthew does a number on the plot here.

The amazing part of the story is Jesus' reply. The text reads, "Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.'"

The beatitude, the "blessed," at the end is, "Cool it, John. Don't be offended. Look at my ministry and you'll know that the Messiah has come." It's amazing that Jesus doesn't offer pious or esoteric words about the meaning of Messiah. Instead, he says look at what I'm doing. This is first century healing and good news ministry. It translates today in similar and different ways.

Advent is about coming and the important question for us is the same question John asked Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come...?" Jesus came in his time and he comes to us today in the way he is lived out in our lives. It's our response to John.

Translated, the Messiah has come into our church, the Body of Christ:

The blind receive their sight and the deaf walk in Faith in Practice, which members of our church, Helen Morita and Nancy Parsons, participate in, and

we support. In Guatemala, they fix cleft palates; repair torn hernias, damaged gall bladders, and a host of other illnesses. It is Christian doctors and nurses giving of their time and talents for this amazing ministry.

The Messiah has come into our church, the Body of Christ:

Less literally, we do all the things that Jesus did to affirm life and wholeness. Melissa has organized our garbage disposal system to care for our environment. John Girton and I were speaking last week about making our church's lighting system more sustainable and we revisited the prospect of installing solar panels on our building.

The Messiah has come into our church, the Body of Christ:

I visited Whole Foods recently and they asked for a donation for the Food Bank. I happily told them that we had Food bank barrels at our church and we buy food from Whole Foods to put in the barrels.

The Messiah has come into our church, the Body of Christ:

The scout leader of our chartered Pack 43 asked me last week to identify a couple of needy families or individuals that they can give gifts to and other practical support at this time. I would identify the individuals and let them know and they would raise the funds and buy gifts. They would not need the identities of the person or persons concerned. They trust me as pastor of the church they appreciate to provide the information and they would deliver the items to me for distribution. This trust level is what the church is all about. Jesus comes into our midst when trust is valued and maintained.

The Messiah has come into our church, the Body of Christ:

Yesterday, our deacons did what is typical of members of this church. They caringly provided a lovely reception for Inga Coleman's memorial service; and Inga's son, Bill, tells me that he remembers his mother doing the same for memorials in the past. The circle of love continues.

The Messiah has come into our church, the Body of Christ:

Need I recount the many other ways we affirm Jesus in our midst in our governance, worship, education, communal caring and mission. Our support of our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA) supports ministries of peace, justice and compassion throughout our country and world. I spoke with the administrator of the Taskforce on the Americas that rents space from us. They had a speaker from Honduras here last Friday and we shared notes about their work and our denominational mission in Honduras. Our analyses and concerns for the wellbeing of that country were the same, which shows that we are in

touch with the latest and greatest work for peace and justice for the poor in the world.

If I were to address John the Baptist I would say, "Affirm and claim the stories of your youth about Jesus and your special relationship with him, and take no offense." Jesus as Messiah was the one to come and he has come in powerful ways throughout history and in our corner of the world in Redwoods Presbyterian Church, and he will continue to come in magnificent ways to the end of the age. Amen.