

Virginia Synod ELCA

Sermon for Dec. 23, 2018 (Third Sunday of Advent – C year)

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Micah 5:2-5a - From Bethlehem comes a ruler

Psalm options: Luke 1:46b-55 - You, Lord, have lifted up the lowly. (Lk. 1:52)

Psalm 80:1-7 (alternate) - Let your face shine upon us, and we shall be saved.

Hebrews 10:5-10 - I have come to do your will

Luke 1:39-45 [46-55] - Blessed are you among women / My soul magnifies the Lord

Nestled in the hills just west of the city of Jerusalem is what used to be just a little village called Ain Kerem. Nowadays it's basically a suburb of metropolitan Jerusalem and the site of Israel's premiere hospital and a couple of big tourist hotels. But Ain Kerem has an important identity much older than all of that, because it is remembered in Christian tradition as the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah and the place where John the Baptist was born.

Ain Kerem was very small in those days, but with a very large view. It sits at the top of the long Sorek valley that runs from the top of the Judean ridge where Jerusalem is down to the coastal plain next to the Mediterranean Sea. Its name means "spring of the vineyard," and so suggests the richness of God's good gifts in the land. But it has seen terrors as well as blessings throughout its history. Traders and travelers would use the valley to move from east to west, but so would armies. For that reason, Ain Kerem has seen its share of powerful passers-by over the centuries. In about 1100 BC, the Philistines came up this valley to try and cut the Israelite army in half, the Assyrians came up in about 700 BC to lay siege to the Israelite capital, the Romans came up this way on their final approach to destroy Jerusalem and the temple in 70AD, and the Crusaders passed by there in 1099 AD on their way to slaughter what they thought was the infidel population of Jerusalem. Through it all, Ain Kerem has watched all of this from its hillside perch overlooking the Sorek valley.

This accident of location made Ain Kerem both an unlikely place and the perfect place for the meeting that is in today's gospel lesson. Mary has learned that she is expecting a baby, who will be Jesus - the Messiah and the Savior. But in order to avoid the embarrassment that she is bound to bring on her family in her home town of Nazareth, which is far to the north, she travels to the home of her relative Elizabeth, who herself is expecting a child, who will be John the Baptist. There, in Ain Kerem, the two women meet, and immediately the excitement begins.

If Mary is remembered as the first Christian (the **first** to recognize Jesus as the Messiah), then John the Baptist is remembered as the **second**. As soon as Elizabeth sees Mary, John - still unborn - already realizes that the Messiah is in the house! And then Elizabeth herself, feeling John's excitement, also realizes that the Messiah is there and so becomes the **third** believer.

So now we have gathered in Ain Kerem the Christ himself; Mary, who will bear Christ to the world; John, who is the chief proclaimer of the Messiah's work; and Elizabeth, whose house faces the world.

It is the first Christian worship service in history. And so, naturally, what do they do but sing! And what a song it is - Mary's Magnificat - my soul magnifies the Lord. It's as if she is saying that from this small village - easily-ignored but witness to so much of the world's action - the purpose of her life is to make the Lord more visible - larger - to magnify the Lord to those around her, to the powerful passers-by in the valley below, so that instead of just passing by, they will see there the details of God's work. That's what happens when you magnify something - it enables you to see the details.

Mary talks about those details - God's direct attention to the poor, the lowly, the small, and the small places, like Ain Kerem. Mary calls everyone to look at God's ordinary people, the mass of us who just try to make it day to day through the problems of family and finances, of faith and tragedy, yet who know that God is at work. I don't need to tell you that many people in this world have no idea of the great things God does every day in the lives of people in our church family, both in this congregation and far beyond.

People left to their own instincts will usually try to magnify themselves – saying either look how great I am or look how bad my problems are. But God's people are intent on joining Mary in magnifying the Lord. Years after this scene in today's gospel John the Baptist will echo Mary's song. In speaking of Jesus, John will say "he must increase, I must decrease."

I have this image of the great forces of history marching through the valley past Ain Kerem on their way up to what they think is their glory in Jerusalem, and yet never realizing what they are passing by - the Messiah, his witnesses, and his worshipers.

Each week in this place we recreate the scene at Ain Kerem. Jesus is among us, we give excited witness to his presence, we sing songs of praise to him, we talk about God's great work in the small places of life, and we will go from here to bear him to the world, just as Mary finally went on to bear Christ to the world. And yet, in the same way, we know that, sadly, those enthralled with the world itself, on their way to what they think is their glory, drive right past our church building and many others, on their way to who knows what, going right past God's people without seeing what God is up to.

Of course, Mary did not stay in Ain Kerem, she eventually traveled with Joseph to another small village about ten miles to the southwest called Bethlehem, where she saw the fulfilment of what was promised to her - she bore the Messiah to the world.

Thank God that when we are on our way to what we think is our glory, God's grace has allowed our attention to be caught by the little celebration going on in that little village and then allowed us to turn our own celebration into the very same thing, so that the world walking past will likewise notice the mother to be singing to her unborn baby in Ain Kerem.

In the name of Christ, Amen.