

MICAH 5:2-5a
LUKE 1:46b-55
HEBREWS 10:5-10
LUKE 1:39-45

Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 19, 2021; Year C

Beyond the Myth!

It was as if it happened yesterday, a moment frozen in time, forever etched in my very long memory. I will never forget that lonely Christmas Eve back in 1986. I was living in Louisville, Kentucky, completing what would turn out to be my sixth and final year in seminary. Yes, I did the extended tour, surely wearing out my welcome as a student. Due to the heavy workload, I decided not to go home to Atlanta, but rather I chose to stay in Louisville and work on my Master of Theology (ThM) thesis that had to be completed to allow me to graduate in spring. I was also employed at LAZARUS department store selling Ladies' shoes and was needed during this busy time of year. Something about you women and shoes! Dangerous stereotype, but hey, I resemble that remark! Besides, working on straight commission made for a big bonus at Christmas! A friend with whom I worked invited me to join her family for the Christmas Eve service at their Presbyterian shop and I certainly wanted to attend worship somewhere on this sacred night and so I gladly accepted the invitation. Upon arrival, the house was already packed with an overflow crowd, full of excited worshippers, a sense of anticipation and expectancy filling the air, the sanctuary alive with a reverently resonating atmosphere. The service turned out to be nothing extra special, nothing out of the ordinary, much like many services dutifully and carefully planned and implemented. But I will never forget, the minister boldly dared to preach a sermon that evening. When the time came for him to deliver, and we are not talking holy babies here, he slowly made his way to the pulpit, and as we like to say, mounted the sacred desk. He leaned forward and

looked out lovingly at the assembled congregation, every parishioner at rapt attention, silently waiting in suspense for the homiletical offering to begin. He paused for effect, for a moment that seemed like eternity, frozen in time, as if time was literally standing still, as if in suspended animation, every breath hanging in the balance, and then he proceeded to go about the task of bringing his sermon special, no doubt a homily for the ages. Still leaning forward for effect, he humbly muttered, “Well, it’s Christmas Eve!”

In all honesty, I was fit to be tied and let out what I am sure was an inappropriate audible groan. No duh, Sherlock! “Duh”, by the way, being politely sanitized Sunday morning speak if you get my drift! This obviously overwhelmed minister literally sucked the mystery right out of the room. No place to go but up, as we say. I could not begin to tell you the rest of the sermon because I never recovered from his opening salvo, this benignly bland initial remark mumbled into the microphone. Some sermon introduction! Way to begin, dude! I swore that night, right then and there, as God is my witness, confessing my vow before God and no one else, because I did not want to be negatively critical of this family’s much beloved clergyman, that I would never, never, never, ever, preach on Christmas Eve. It has been my policy for more than thirty years and I have steadfastly stuck to that easy to keep promise. No one comes to church on Christmas Eve to hear any preacher’s blather, no matter how gifted or boring they may be in the pulpit, no matter the content in their sermon arsenal they pretend is above reproach. Christmas Eve is an evening that is all about the baby, dedicated to a baby born in the miracle, myth, and mystery of a most precious and yes, holy, moment. Christmas Eve is all about the three “Cs”, Candlelight, Carols, and Communion. Nothing more, nothing less is needed. There are simply times, sacred times, holy moments, when words fail us, escape us, when the magnificence, the magnitude, yes, the “Magnificat”, the magnification of the moment is so large that trying to describe it, to put into words, mere

words, to analyze this breathtaking stuff in any way, to interpret these incredible ideas, these amazing themes, using even our best imagery is a monumental impossibility. When all things are considered our best sermonic efforts amount to nothing more than inane minutiae, the equivalent of esoteric psychobabble. Our drive only cheapens these vain attempts to capture a moment, a complete and utter exercise in futility. “Well, it’s the Fourth Sunday of Advent!”

Perhaps the Gospel writer known as Luke was having the same kind of difficulty, running into similar trouble, facing the same challenges, at a total loss for words, same as that aforementioned erstwhile minister, along with the rest of us who are tasked with writing and preaching sermons, always hoping and praying that we are able to deliver somewhat coherent and relevant messages. Perhaps this obviously creative Lukan writer was having the same issues, experiencing the same frustrations that come with a blank page staring back at a blank mind, when hopelessly attempting to put proverbial pen to paper in a hopeless attempt to describe the indescribable, explain the unexplainable, define the indefinable, express the inexpressible and on we go. Writing then was no different than writing now! It is always a tall task, a challenging assignment especially when under pressure! Writing a good sermon is a lot like composing music, writing poetry, dabbling in prose. At its core, sermon writing is another genre of storytelling! Good preaching demands an orchestration creating a choreography of concepts and words, a symphony of sensory images all conjoined, a combination of what is often a series of disconnected ideas, all designed in the hopes of creating something even remotely captivating and imaginative that will last at least until a parishioner gets out the door on the way to lunch and other Sunday activities, the sacramental ritual of football watching, and cussing included. And, of course, at a baseline sermons must be anything but boring. It is a tall order, a huge task! I tend to write from front to back with what I call, and my colleagues have confirmed, a steady stream of consciousness. I

literally go into somewhat of a trance when I compose at the computer. Some of you have witnessed that strange phenomenon, my bizarre process, when you come by my office for a visit and see me obsessively at work at the keyboard. Yes, I mumble and mutter a lot myself!

I cannot help but wonder if the Gospel writers, at least Matthew, Luke, and John, were captivated by something so far beyond their wildest imagination or dreams, if they were experiencing the same rubrics when they leaned into and beyond the mystery of the message. These three Gospel writers attempted this impossible feat while heavily relying on myth and legend as they created these fanciful epic tales that unfortunately got reduced to literalized nonsense by the Western Church with its naturally deeply rooted western mindset, ignoring the transportive capacity inherent in metaphor, the beauty of allegory, all conveying underlying meanings, a message that goes far deeper than any factual story could ever translate or portray. You will notice that I left out Mark who is much more matter of fact in his presentation and does not begin his version with a fanciful birth or incarnation story. Imagine being in that moment when both Luke and Matthew first began to write their uniquely creative versions, these grand renditions we call “infancy narratives,” as they began to ponder what a holy birth might be like, what it would look like, descriptive of one born with the weighty responsibility of becoming holy, of embodying holiness, falsely presumed to be divine during his lifetime, a charge he rebuked at every opportunity according to the Gospel narratives. Yes, Jesus was invoked with a most peculiar, a special status solely afforded an innocent infant, anointing this typical baby in a way that shortly after his death, he would be called Son of God, appointed as Savior, Christ, Messiah, and you name it. No matter the import these words contained, all words are suspect, inadequate, escaping any composers their best interpretive conceptions, conception being an operative word today. Even the writer of that lyrical Prologue in the Gospel of John, as this wordsmith and unnamed editors attempted to describe incarnational

substance as a way of introduction, the Johannine writer was obviously mentally, perhaps emotionally, taken to a different place, carried away to a different dimension or reality. To use an image from Star Trek, to be teleported where no one had ever imaginatively dared gone before. “Scotty, I mean John, beam me up!” Wow, what creative minds! Yes, what creative minds we cheapen, trivialize, stomp into the dust while trashing the legacy of the writers, when we have the audacity to insist that these “recollections” were describing historical events, recalling factual occurrences transpiring in real time and space. No wonder some skeptics and cynics are prone to ask when reading their magical musings, “just what were they thinking?” Some might even ask “what they were smoking?” And of course, they, along with more than a few of us, wonder how in the world there are those throwbacks, traditionalists who in this enlightened age, this postmodern day, accept this stuff verbatim.

As we begin the transition from the four weeks of Advent to the twelve days of Christmastide, our texts now turn us toward the City of David to see once again the great sight of the miracle of Bethlehem at Christmas once again. Once more we are confronted with the challenge of knowing that the miraculous has nothing to do with virgin births, floating stars, annunciating angels breaking out in song, and other numerous fanciful characterizations and caricatures. Today we read the imaginative story of two women being great with child in Mary’s purported visit to Zechariah and Elizabeth, Lizzy reportedly being about six months pregnant as she excitedly and unexpectedly carried Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist, a pregnancy that took everyone by surprise, catching this older couple off guard and unawares, much like Abraham and Sarah back in the day. We are told in a most fanciful tale of a child leaping in a womb, calling forth an exclamation of praise and thanksgiving that became part of the stuff that eventually became the Catholic Rosary, the writer’s effort at magnifying the myth and the mystery exploding off the page in that

clandestine meeting of two strong feminine minds. And of course, we read the Magnificat, the Song of Mary, a hospitable narrative echoing an older song in its original form found in I Samuel (2:1-10), known as the prayer of Hannah, now revealed once again, brought out of mothballs and portrayed in a new light, given a new purpose, a new meaning for a new day, wonderfully declaring that the downtrodden would be uplifted and the powerful, represented at the time of these writings by the evil wickedness of Rome's oppressive occupiers, wistfully brought down to their knees, all echoing the promises of the prophet Isaiah proclaiming that every valley would be exalted, and every hill made low, a metaphor for all humanity, inclusive of all human beings of every stripe, every culture and nation, every orientation. All these prophecies eventually and perhaps inevitably to be fulfilled in the teachings, the mission and ministry of Jesus. Whatever the facts of the case were, mere language would never suffice, and so these writers, unaware they were writing Bible, used the most creative, outrageously imaginative, metaphorical, allegorical, symbolic, language they could conceive and conspire.

What do you do when you need adjectives when no adjectives will do? You just go with it, waxing eloquent in the process, enjoying the ride, using as much hyperbole as you can muster, all you can stand—as with my sermons, never enough, never a shortage of adjectives—embellishing and exaggerating at will, all intended to capture attention and imagination, to get a skeptical, even cynical, audience to stop and read and perhaps be persuaded at least to some degree. The challenge is to get everyone, to let everyone who reads these outlandish, unbelievable tales, know beyond a shadow of all doubt that this delivery was a most significant happening, that this birth was something spectacular, of profound import, way different from any ordinary nativity, that the arrival of this infant child amounted to a once in a lifetime, a once in forever event. These sacred stories declare that something amazingly, serendipitously, had imminently, immediately,

transpired in their midst. Besides, after all, adjectival expression is the spice of life! This was the modus operandi of the Gospel writers who wanted to thoughtfully imagine and then visually image what an amazing birth of holy proportions might look like if anyone dared to have the Chutzpah, the brazen nerve (insert your favorite line), to arrogantly attempt to put such things into words, all bets off in declaring what was certainly beyond the bounds of literal description. Yes, the writer of Luke's Gospel was diligently searching for the perfect words, looking to create the perfect story. Yes, in the infancy narratives from both Luke's and Matthew's perspective, we find that profound level of storytelling, weaving a miraculously, mythically magical, tale.

In these two fictional versions of mythic proportions, are woven two epic tales that indeed capture a mystery that is beyond any and all words, any and all myth, mere language never enough to describe even the slightest modicum of a hint of divine transcendence. For you see, what was readily apparent to both Luke and Matthew, what they understood full well in a most intuitive, sensory, way is that the very thing that we western-mindset folks often tend to fail to get, too engrained or thick-headed, stubborn, or whatever it is that causes us to fail to understand, to embrace the insecurity and vulnerability of mystery, open ended enigma wrapped in questions and not concerned with answers that always keep us from full disclosure, always beyond our limited, finite, grasp, frankly, as it all is anyway, no matter how we slice it. **Yes, when describing sacred moments, when time seems to wonderfully stand still, when we are able to perceive something of mystical presence, whatever constitutes the essence of holiness, holy substance, the only language that will remotely suffice is the beauty of poetry, the imagination of prose, all wrapped in the language of metaphor, myth, and the miracle of mystery. The irony about the infancy narratives is that the original audience, steeped in Jewish midrash tradition, knew full well how to read these kinds of stories, never ever even remotely reading them as literal, never mistaking**

them for factual history. Not until the expansion of the early Church into Hellenistic, Greek speaking, cultures, thanks to the evangelistic missionary efforts of Paul, did these extravagantly expansive and amazingly imaginative texts get reduced to pedestrian matter of fact—just the facts ma’am—ask and answer narratives. Never in their wildest dreams did the original Jewish audience believe these storytellers were describing actual events. Never! Not once! And we think we are so smart and have come so far! For times like whenever and whatever the birth of Jesus was really like, you need drama, a pageant, you need a mystic or a poet, a brilliant novelist, not a preacher or a prophet. Sorry, you are stuck with one this morning ! The biggest problem, one among many when we attempt to decipher these texts to death and detail, is our insecure need to concretize, indeed, to literalize these ancient texts, and in so doing, we thus concretize, literalize the message, including the rare moments of transcendence, overflowing with awe and wonder and mystery, a delicious recipe that went into the composition of these special narratives and is still available if we would only avail ourselves and be ready and willing to be open to all this and more, avoiding the pitfalls of our own propensity to sabotage, to limit, even stifle, these talented and gifted word crafters’ unlimited capacity to tell a story, to sing a song, their beautiful, lyrical, song. Just look at the beauty and brilliance of the Magnificat, Mary’s song. We kill any novella’s meaning, movement, and momentum right there, dead in its tracks, when we are frightened by the prospect of biblical fiction, consumed by our own hauntingly narrow perspective, indeed consistently reduced to playing to the least common denominator, when we take the well-worn paths of least resistance, an easy road indeed, nothing new to see here. Mary’s wonderfully allegorical soliloquy is pregnant with the best of human possibility, is literally poetry in motion, yes, a most magnificent monologue! What does it mean to magnify the Lord? Who knows, but it seems an awesome and overwhelming, but amazing and wonderful, task.

Perhaps this level of engagement we seek as we seek to dance with the Divine, flirt with the essence of pure holiness, of holy presence, happens in the rarified air when human meets divine, when the Divine and human meet. The word in Greek from the Christian scriptures is that these are “Kairos” moments, never to be confused with “Chronos” time, the clock and the calendar pacing our daily suffocating routines while controlling our every move. No, “Kairos” time is a time of transcendence when we experience a hint, a sense of the existentially beholding the gift of a transcendent aura, captivatingly sensing the divine in our realm, in our world, in our lives. In Celtic lore, these rarest of moments are reflected in certain, very special locales in the countryside called “thin places.” In a sermon from her book *The Preaching Life*, Barbara Brown Taylor tells of a wonderful vacation. She tells the story, “A couple of summers ago my husband Ed and I went to Ireland. We both have roots there, and we secretly suspect that we may be descended from Druids. It is that Celtic sense of place that is so appealing—of holy trees, holy wells, holy mountains—‘thin places,’ as the Irish call them—places where the veil between this world and the next is so sheer that it is easy to step through. If you have been there yourself, then you know about the stone rings and sacred springs. There are so many of them in Ireland that plenty of them are not even marked. You can be walking down an ordinary country lane all of a sudden see a footpath leading off to the left. Follow it for a couple hundred feet and you come to a little mossy hole full of crystal clear water. It would be easy to mistake it for an ordinary watering hole if it were not for the tidy bank of stones around it, set there hundreds of years ago by people who recognized a ‘thin place’ right there in the middle of a sheep pasture. If you can stop all the racket in your own mind and body, you can sometimes feel it for yourself—a freshness that drenches you as thoroughly as a shower. How it works is a complete mystery, but there is no denying the effect. Simply to stand still near it is to experience living water.” As it is with these “thin

places” so eloquently described by BBT, as those of us in the trade affectionately call her, in much the same way, so it is with these infancy narratives and other fanciful tales creatively written in the Gospels and in numerous other places throughout the Bible. If we can dare leave the confining and conforming constructs and constrictors of narrow literalist approaches to these texts, we open our world to not only the gift of imagination, but to the mystery that always lies beyond mere words on a page, never to be bound by the limitations of semantical boundaries and borders, any local idioms or vernacular, any expressive vocabulary or our most mesmerizing language. Take the risk! Take the plunge! Be bold and daring, courageous, braving the possibility of all that is hidden, lurking within what we have come to claim as sacred writ, as holy scripture, but once understood to be simple short stories, just waiting, always waiting, for your discovery, enlightenment and enjoyment.

The Book of Judges declares that the word of the Lord was rare in those days. Perhaps this intuitive writer was describing all our days. But just maybe the problem lies with us and not with the biblical narrative, texts that have the capacity, the capability, to guide our worship, feed our spirits, nourish our souls, and enhance our spirituality, all while informing and impacting, exercising and expressing our ever-expanding, ever-evolving devotional prowess. Perhaps we are limited in our understanding because of the way we limit these carefully crafted volumes. Yes, as many progressives are now declaring, we need to learn to read the Christian scriptures, what we traditionally call the New Testament, through Jewish eyes, Hebraic lenses. Perhaps that is the key to unlocking mystery, of even beginning to understand the ways and means of Jesus of Nazareth, once and always, forever perhaps, a Jew, never a Christian, never converting! We must learn, for the first time, to read these stories, all these narratives, from a Jewish perspective. And yes, I will be the first to acknowledge as a Gentile, that this is not necessarily an easy thing to do, demanding a lot of practice, a

hyper amount of reprogramming, recalibrating and retrofitting. The bottom line, ironically speaking, is that originally these Christian scriptures were in their totality, and remain, purely Jewish documents solely dedicated to and intended for Jewish readers, their eyes only, written by Jews for Jews, redacted by Jewish editors until their big reveal! End of story! End of debate! If we could only begin to get that fact, perhaps we would better gain a deeper understanding, yes, at the very depth of these insightful stories, origin of composition stuff, knowing that we are not privy, that we do not have access to original manuscripts, probably lost forever. As always, it is context, context, context. If we can somehow manage to remotely perceive the content undergirding these sacred stories, even to the slightest degree, oh how lucky, how blessed we would be in our discovery, even if our interpretation happens as just a divinely inspired informational blip, an occurrence in real time transpiring in the fleeting moment and on the temporary radar of our lifetimes. The thing I love most, have the most appreciation for, is the way the seasons of Advent and Christmastide elide and intersect, the way they mesh and overlap with one another, forcing us to face both the myth and the mystery, all intertwined, in these diverse and yes, conflicting accounts commiserate with the genesis of these complex beginning stories of Jesus, these pregnant birth narratives just waiting to conceive within us new insight and knowledge. Yes, it is indeed challenging, but oh so very critical, that we learn to artfully discern and articulate the difference between myth and mystery, sometimes separated by one degree, a fine line at most, a “thin place,” indeed, knowing the importance, the bare and vital necessity of each. Those who cannot or will not, those who are unable, are doomed to a one-dimensional understanding that reinforces a narrow belief and that inadequately and feeds a subsequently stunted faith that unfortunately and perversely follows the least common denominators and paths of least resistance, a belief system that will suffer the consequences of a mindset that will not stand the test of time, much less sustain a lifetime of faithful living in this twenty-first

century progressive environment fueled by this twenty-first century postmodern age. The primary problem, as I see it, especially at this time of year, is that we are indeed prone to confuse myth and mystery, getting them mixed up in ways that cheapen, damage or ruin, both images. Mystery has nothing to do with the birth of a baby, no, rather it is all about the way that God is made known in the world, God's presence is realized in incarnational ways, the way that the divine is expressed and manifest in the human. Myth has everything to do with how we tell a good, even great, captivating and imaginatively creative story, pointing beyond its words to the infinite realm of the mysterious! That, my friends, is the story of Bethlehem. By the way, Jesus was actually born in Nazareth, but who is keeping score! As Mary asked when she found out she was "prego", with child, "How can these things be?" Yes, that question applies to so much of our theological inquiry, our musings about God, the mystery that is Christ Jesus, the opinions that form the Bible, and other churchly things. But without myth, we cannot build a bridge to mystery much less conceive it, mystery "being" our ultimate goal, our final destination hopefully in this life and definitely in the life to come.

So, as we prepare the way of the Lord, not to mention preparing our hearts and minds, subtly moving from Advent to Christmas this week, let us allow ourselves a little mystery, a nod to the mysterious, a little *divinum mysterium*, *mysterium trimindum*, or one of my favorite choral pieces this time of year, *O Magnum Mysterium* (Spanish Renaissance, by Tomás Luis de Victoria, arr. Parker/Shaw). Let us strive to not get caught up in the minutiae of was she or wasn't she, while critiquing and obsessing on all the other symbolism inherent in these birth narratives, each one brimming with all the captivating adjectives we can behold. And with all the odds stacked against us, we await God's presence amid our frantic, hectic, stressful, and fear and anxiety ridden lives, along with the myriad ways the Spirit of Christ comes into our lives and into our world. **In so many ways, the world is not a whole lot different than**

it was at the time of Jesus' birth, for we still long for holy presence and positively optimistic resolution to all that afflicts us, the best of outcomes, hoping and praying for the merciful grace that comes through the hope, peace, joy, and love wrapped in swaddling clothes in the person of the Christ child, Jesus of Nazareth. The "Herods" of the world are still in power, fat and happy on their thrones, taxation still overwhelms us, and we continue to hear of wars and rumors of war, enduring a protracted pandemic, while subjected to the wrath of nature. Wow, what a weather week it was! Unprecedented! So, it has always been and so it will always be. So, it is and so it will continue forever and ever. And so, we await the very human one in the gracious person of Jesus, who best embodied the presence of God and reminds us that incarnation is not just reserved for the man from Nazareth but is intended for all of us, Jesus being our ultimate "how-to" guide, our mentor and model. Yes, go and be likewise! No, incarnation was not and is not limited to a baby born in a stable, born of such poor and meagre estate in a humble manger. We too, delightfully embody and miraculously contain the very Spirit of the Christ. The Spirit, the still speaking Spirit, is imbued within us all, a fulfilled promise, "being" instilled within our being, an incarnational miracle indeed. Yes, that is the miracle of incarnation! These miraculous moments are not onetime, frozen in time, "The Incarnation" events! This incarnational miracle continues to happen continually indeed in each and every one of us! Yes, God is with us and in us. Incarnation inherently comes with being a divinely created creature! So come Lord Jesus, come again in the innocence of a humble, human birth! Come again and again and again in the Spirit of the Christ, bringing all the good gifts that only come from the Holy, the fulfillment of all our hopes and dreams for all the years. Come again! Come once more! Come! Ask and answer! Thanks be to God!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and whose incarnation continues to be ours for the taking! Amen and amen!