



# SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Sermon for Sunday, December 23, 2018

*The Fourth Sunday of Advent*

FR. CHARLES WITKE

Micah 5:2-5a | Psalm 80:1-7 | Hebrews 10:5-10 | Luke 1:39-55

The Christmas story begins shortly after this our last Sunday in Advent this year. It begins in less than two days with Christmas eve and Jesus' birth, and the centre of attention becomes the helpless newborn that he is. Today we have a bit of a breather. Luke's Gospel tells us what happened after Mary was ambushed by the angel Gabriel. Everything had been looking familiar to her, and to Joseph. They were about to be married, when God decided to become active in their world, and their world and ours as well were never the same. Advent with remarkable care prepares us for Christmas. God is tactful: everything looks familiar, and when we are not looking, everything is suddenly and profoundly different. That is where Mary is today in the unfolding story. She has been reliably informed that she is to bear a child, that it's not Joseph who is the father, that the child is the Son of God, and much else too that she finds perplexing. It's a lot for a girl probably not more than fifteen or so to take in. And that news changed everything: for Mary, Joseph, and for us who have been brought here this morning somehow by this news, brought here by varying paths, and for varying reasons.

In St Luke's narration today we see how Mary handles this news. She consents, but she isn't overjoyed. It takes her some time to absorb the news. And the angel, the messenger of how her life is now turned upside down, also tells her that her older relative is now six months pregnant.

Maybe he tells her this to console her, but he doesn't suggest a visit to her: angels never tell us how to handle God's message which they bring, or what to do, unfortunately, but they stick to the message they are to deliver.

Mary does not greet this news the angel brings with soaring song and blazing hope. She is likely overwhelmed. Indeed, she wants to get out of town. If she, unmarried, is going to have a baby, getting away to a quiet country town where her relative Elizabeth lives is a very good idea, given that she is now can be subject to mob justice as an unmarried mother to be.

Mary wants to be with someone who understands. And in the exchanges of greetings as the ambushed young girl, and the older woman who is finally becoming a mother, have their supportive meeting, both come to know that God works in really unexpected, even most unusual, ways, that tend to become uncomfortably direct and personal and unescapable. And only then Mary sings her song of hope: my soul magnifies the Lord.

God is active in the world, and has acted in Mary's world so that she and Elizabeth and we too can come to recognize God moving and acting among us, and how we have a part to play, however small, in that divine action. The Jesus whose birth the Angel Gabriel announces to Mary, who here reacts with joy, will tell us the same thing: God goes about bringing joy and peace and love and hope to a broken world, but he does all this through us: by enlarging, magnifying, God's grace and and spirit and values through us. My soul magnifies the Lord. Mary's words mean nothing other than that through me, through you, through us, others can see the Lord more clearly.

We too are called to magnify God. Through the way we choose to live our life as Mary chose in freedom to say yes to the Angel's message, and the way we choose to practice our faith here in the world, we magnify God's actions with our own practices, we magnify God's words with our own words and actions in the world.

It's a big responsibility, even sometimes a radical change from the way things were, as happened to Mary. In the here and now of our lives, we are invited, and not just at this season, to collaborate with God in divine action: actions that lift up the lowly, feed the hungry, stand up for the poor and the oppressed: and all the other actions Mary names.

The end of Advent and the coming of Christmas is upon us. It's not too late to look at this big question: how do I, how do we, magnify the Lord? Mary was able to answer it by saying yes to God; so are we. Whatever we have or haven't done in answering this question, Mary teaches us and all of Scripture teaches us, that when God wants to do something, it's the little things, the ordinary, the unexceptional, that God often uses as the means of salvation. It's enough. God speaks in the language of everyday events. When God wanted to redeem creation God enters that creation to seek permission of a very young woman, and enters the world fully and completely as one of the most vulnerable creatures: an infant. And like Mary, the Mother of Our Lord, we, though we are unimportant, are enough: enough to say yes, and to magnify and show forth the greatness of God in our own life and time and decisions and actions. May God send us grace to see clearly our part in this story of hope.

Amen.