

WONDER – LUKE 1:46b-55
DECEMBER 14, 2008 – ADVENT III
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As we approach Christmas Day we have in this morning's wonderful presentation of our Scripture lesson a very ordinary event.

Mary goes to the Judean hill country to spend her final trimester of pregnancy with her cousin, Elizabeth who is also in the later months of pregnancy. Luke's account consists almost entirely of speech and song which is reflected today in our choir's rendition of this story with our reader, John Horn.

You might be thinking there's nothing ordinary about the appearance and announcement of the angel Gabriel. But remember angels were very common in first century Palestine – if not also today according to a recent survey by the religion department of Baylor University.

Granted, what is extraordinary about this event is the new life Mary carries within her. But that's my point this morning: the strangeness and beauty of Luke's message is literally carried within a common earthen vessel – Mary and her surroundings

To the rest of the world, certainly to Herod, Pilate, and Caesar himself, even if they had been aware of it, there was nothing different or compelling taking place at this meeting in, what Luke calls, the “uplands of Judah.”

But what is about to unfold is nothing less than the construction of a celestial bridge from heaven to earth; a toll-free highway; the path of hope and justice and peace for the world's disadvantaged and downtrodden.

I've had fun lately reading 19th century English poet, John Clare along side the reflections of his half-generation younger contemporary Charles Darwin. Both were what we call “naturalists” –

amateur observers of the natural world without whom much of the foundation of modern science would be missing. Darwin names dozens of them in his *Origin of Species* known then for their research and reflections on everything from birds to fauna to marine life.

Their cataloguing and keen observation of similarities and dissimilarities of thousands of species was relentless and insatiable.

Clare's poetry is the same. It delights in close description without pretending to go anywhere else or do anything more. If he has one, he has a dozen poems on the nests of birds, the young of mammals, or how the horizon changes through the seasons where the furrows meet the distant sky in his beloved fen country.

Americans too saw nature in the new world with a voracious appetite and wonder: Thoreau and Whitman stand out for their close and lengthy accounts of the New England woods or immigrant populations and their array of trades and skills.

What is striking about these poets and naturalists is their expectation that just by observing the world around them they would encounter the sublime and in so doing discover again how strange and wonderful creation is.

We've had two weeks of apocalypse, first from Mark then from the second letter of Peter. The world is ending they warn and limited is the time you and I have to set things aright, change our crooked ways, and turn toward the source of life.

Based on those two readings you might expect the third week of Advent to include an explosion or earthquake. But instead, fire and brimstone give way to the ebb and flow of life in a rural village. We might imagine Mary and Elizabeth in that last trimester of pregnancy, when women seem to glow, spending the passing days together – sharing their experience of carrying a child, the hopes and dreams for the children they bear, and the family life to which they look forward.

Yet, for all they share in common, the careful reader will note: one is old, her son will close an age; the other is young, her son will usher in the new.

The casual reader will not fully grasp the repositioning of the planet as these women sip tea and knit infant caps. But the close observer detects in this domestic portrait, the new axis of God's new world: the lowly are raised and the lofty are brought low.

Indeed, Mary sings of the God who brings down the mighty and exalts those of low degree, who fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty. But there is more here than the future social message and ministry of Jesus to the poor and oppressed. That will follow but in this prelude to the great symphony of his life we have the major theme Jesus comes to lead and direct: the complete reversal of fortunes; the powerful and rich will exchange places with the powerless and poor.

Here Luke with skill and subtlety signals that this eschatological reversal, millennia from now, has already begun in God's very choice of Mary.

I don't know about you, but my life, especially at this time of year, seems to be shot from a canon and then feel as if I am going too slowly. So much to do, so little time to do it.

Yet, what we lack, I think, is the willingness to walk aimlessly like John Clare through the fen country or Wordsworth taking-in the Lake District. Exercise the patience of Darwin to study and appreciate the marvelous features of our own lives and the people in them. Find the joy of Whitman that though we are all homo sapiens no two of us is alike, each different in myriad and fascinating ways.

In the concluding sentence of his great treatise Darwin says, for those who are still awake after what some say are his boring descriptions of birds and bushes, "There is grandeur in this view of life."

In the midst of the drama that surrounds and distracts our world, let us take notice of the presence of God in this season and her preparing us to witness the birth of a new world.

We're still in the period of gestation. Mary has yet to return to Nazareth, pack her bag, and make her way, with her betrothed, to Bethlehem.

But when the contractions begin and the baby arrives we won't want to miss it. It's time to slow down, say no to a few obligations, and ready ourselves by waiting for God to show up in our daily routine. You never know how she'll package some new opportunity to reverse privilege and power. But of this we can be sure: it's already begun

in the common circumstances of what we consider our ordinary, and sometimes even mundane, lives. Amen.