

# Sermon: Advent 7

The Rev. Mike Wernick

December 20, 2015

Year C

Micah 5:2-5a

Canticle 15

Hebrews 10:5-10

Luke 1:39-45

I once attended a gathering of almost three-thousand people... we met in a convention center in Washington DC... in a theatre-type space... with stadium seating sweeping down to a large stage... and at the end of one particular break... the speaker was trying to re-establish order... to herd cats... she called from her podium... assisted by a very effective sound system... for everyone... wherever they were... to please stop what they were doing... and settle down... and be seated... and be quiet... so we could continue...

But for many more minutes... for what seemed like far too long... from one end of the room to the other... people kept on chatting... or walking to wherever they were going... or doing whatever they were doing... and it was almost as though... almost as though I could hear each person saying to themselves... *Oh... everyone else should stop chatting... or walking... or doing... what I'm talking about... where I'm going... what I'm doing... is important... everyone else should listen to her... everyone else should settle down... everyone else should fall in line... what I'm doing won't take long... won't interfere... won't disturb...*

But the woman at the podium wasn't in a hurry... she could wait... she could improvise... there was an agenda... but we weren't bound by a strict schedule... this group was a group of meditators... and the conference agenda was less about doing... and more about being... so there was patience... there was Grace [you might say]... there was little interest in imposing the will of the few on the will of the many... they could wait until the collective energy in that space gained more coherence... and the leaders discerned the right moment to continue... I think we could call this God-

waiting... it's like how God juggles the flexibility between our free will... and God's plan for all of creation...

For seven weeks now... we've been shifting our focus from the manger to the wideness of God's plan... we've been improvising with new candle lighting... with prayers of the day... and prayers of the people... we've been more aware of how the readings from the end of Year B feed into the beginning of Year C... we've been more aware of connections... and always... we keep building on what we've inherited... building on what we know... and fashion it into something new...

Lauren Winner... who's a professor of Christian spirituality at Duke Divinity School... writes that jazz was never her favorite kind of music... and she doesn't know much about it... but one thing she learned... is that jazz resists definition... and that one thing you can almost always find in jazz... is improvisation... building on the dominant melody... building on it with available instruments... and fashioning it into something new...

The word *improvise* actually comes from the Latin for *not foreseen*. *Not foreseen*. Winner writes: surely Mary did not foresee that one day while she was home... calmly practicing her scales... an angel would show up... announce that Mary is pregnant with a baby whose father is God... and who will be the savior of the world... but while hard for Mary to foresee... pregnancy that is a gift from God is also not without precedent... and as Mary figures out how to respond to God's action... she latches onto the example of Hannah...

Like Mary... Samuel's mother Hannah responds to the gift of pregnancy that God gives her by singing... [and as you hear this part of her song... keep in mind The Magnificat you all just read]: *My heart exults in the LORD... I have triumphed through the LORD... I gloat over my enemies... there is no holy one like the LORD... there is no rock like our God... talk no more with lofty pride... let no arrogance cross your lips... the bows of the*

*mighty are broken... and the faltering are girded with strength... men once sated must hire out for bread... and men once hungry hunger no more... The LORD raises the poor from the dust... lifts up the needy... setting them with nobles... granting them seats of honor...*

The writer... or writers... of The Magnificat... knew how to improvise... they knew how to take the scripture they'd inherited... and like a symphony with it's consistent theme... create new variations on it... in response to what God was doing...

Mary was one of those people... who was on a break at that conference... and when she heard Gabriel's message... when she realized that a new theophany was about to be created... she didn't wait for everyone else to be seated first... she said: *Let it be to me according to your word*... let it be to me according your song... and when the child in Elizabeth's womb heard the music made by Mary's greeting... music that had never been played before... John leapt for joy because of the nearness of God's presence...

Laura Winner reminds us that the life of faith... and the life of the church... require improvisation... and this seems especially true in the context of the current landscape... which is a landscape of change... some things in the church work just as they've always worked... others are not working now... the love of God is working just as it always has... but maybe Wednesday evening Adult Ed is not...

So what have we not foreseen in the life of Holy Cross... and the life of Ascension... how have we improvised... how have we taken what we knew and adapted it to the music around us...

We did it right off the bat in October 2011... at our celebration of new ministry... when Bp. Gepert spoke the Lutheran installation and Bp. Schleicher spoke the Episcopal Eucharist... we did it at our first joint Easter Vigil when the Lutheran font stand cradled a new fused-glass Episcopal font bowl... and we baptized an Episcopalian at Ascension's

former building using blended liturgy... we do it when we come together and engage in what were each other's ministries but are now our own... it's like reading The Magnificat in unison... and hearing not just our own voice... but hearing it as One Voice... in the assembled body of Christ...

The voice from the podium... we could say God's voice... calls us to respond... and as we hold on to the things that remain constant... we also need to let go of transitory things... it's like relying on a symphony's consistent theme... even as we enjoy the variations that come and go... there is an agenda... but there is Grace...

Like Mary... we continue to build on what we know... and fashion it into something new... so that when we feel the presence of Christ... we too can say *Let it be to me according to your word*... and we too can leap for joy... and perhaps we can take a lesson from Mary... who... as Laura Winner wrote: may be in Heaven right now... sipping martinis with Ella Fitzgerald... and teaching the angels how to improvise...

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