

SERMON
4th Sunday of Advent
December 20, 2009

Micah 5:2-5a
Luke 1:46b-55
Hebrews 10:5-10
Luke 1:39-55

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

Sometimes when I make hospital calls I have to wait for a while in the waiting areas before I can see a patient. Many hospitals have beautiful fish aquariums located in these waiting areas. They can be wonderfully relaxing.

It's almost like staring into a fantasy world – a world of bright vivid colors – a world of soothing, peaceful motion – a world of blissful joy. But if you have ever owned an aquarium, you know that they are actually delicately balanced ecosystems.

They are also a lot of work. If the fish are fed too much, you have problems. If the fish are not fed enough, you have problems. If the filters or pumps stop working, you have problems. If the water temperature gets too hot or too cold, you have problems.

But the most interesting troubles happen when you mix species of fish that don't get along in the same tank. If a new aquarium owner makes the mistake of mixing aggressive fish – like cichlids, with mild fish like mollies or guppies, the whole nature of the aquarium changes.

It becomes a battlefield instead of a peaceful environment. The fish that get picked on begin to look really ragged.

Life can be that way too, can't it? I'm sure that we've all come into contact with a "cichlid" or two during our lifetime. Or, maybe we are the "cichlids?" I would guess that not everybody sitting here this morning is a mellow molly.

Regardless, it doesn't take us very long to realize that the world in which we live in is not necessarily a soothing, peaceful place. In fact, at this time of year, tempers tend to run short and many people get stressed out.

Many of our interactions with others leave us feeling a bit ragged. Sometimes, people become more aggressive with one another. And sometimes, people feel so beat up that they withdraw to their own little corners to try and escape.

Cichlids and mollies – these two groups seem to distinguish themselves. For even among people, they can be divided into the mighty and the strugglers.

First, let's talk about the mighty. These are the people that are often perceived to be rich and powerful. Now before you tune me out saying "well, that's not me," remember that everyone sitting in this room right now is in the top 5 percent of the world's wealthiest. We are also citizens of the most powerful nation on earth.

And the temptation is to have the power and the wealth at any cost. The toys that money and power bring are so shiny and attractive, aren't they? Because of this, doing whatever it takes to get power and money can be very, very enticing.

The second group of people – the strugglers, are the people on the outs. These are the people that are often perceived to be weak and poor. Therefore, they feel that they are powerless and useless, and even unloved. As we look at the world around us, the strugglers are easy to see. There are the people who don't have enough to eat. Some live under freeway overpasses. Most live in other countries.

A new pair of sneakers is a luxury that many strugglers will never know. Strugglers can come from families that are divided and filled with conflict. Strugglers can be those who live from one day to the next just trying to stay above water.

They are the unemployed, the uninsured, the homeless. They are those who suffer from chronic diseases, abuse, addictions and mental illness.

The big surprise in all of this is that all of us – both cichlids and mollies, are strugglers. You see, in reality, every one of us is a little of both. Maybe some of us don't have needs for material things, but we have needs when it comes to our souls and our spirits.

And failure to recognize the needs that we all have places us in danger of missing God by seeking after all the wrong things.

There is a true story about a seminary professor that was forced to retire early due to his health. He died at a relatively young age of 58. The last 10 years of his life were spent in and out of hospitals. After his death, his wife gathered some papers that her husband had written.

In one paper, he had written: "When I began my ministry, I thought of myself as standing upon the bank of the stream of life, shouting instructions to the swimmers who were down below. I was the expert.

In the second stage of my ministry, I thought of myself as the rescuer. If I saw someone going down for the third time, I would plunge into the water, rescue them, and then get them started in the right direction. And then I would return to the bank.

But during the last 10 years of my life, I was in the water. And we were fellow strugglers with arms around each other, trying to help one another make it to the shore."

Brothers and sisters, we are all strugglers. We all live in that aquarium that has all sorts of problems: nipping, downright attacking, illness, disease, separation from others, pain, lack of joy, hiding in corners just trying to survive.

But let's go back 2000 years in time. Mary was a very young girl, probably only 12 or 13 years old, when the Angel Gabriel came to her. No one would have paid any attention to her because she wasn't wealthy or powerful. She was a simple peasant girl living in a small insignificant village. Had she died, probably few would have noticed.

Even so, God chose her to be the mother of the Savior of the world. By the age 14, this simple peasant girl had given birth to a baby boy that was to be named Jesus. She was told that God had especially blessed her among all people. She was in some ways like one of us – a struggler. And yet she became “Theotokos” – the Mother of God Incarnate.

Here is a pregnant teenager, with the audacious story of being made pregnant by God. This is at a time when being pregnant out of wedlock declared her as damaged goods. She would have been open to rejection by any future husband. She would have been abandoned by her family.

Some of the consequences of her being pregnant would be: stoning, violence from anyone who chose to take a swing at her, no midwife willing to be present at the birth, Joseph not being able to find work, and family turning against them both.

Yet Mary sings:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.”

How can she sing such words? How can she have hope in light of what she would have been experiencing? How is it that she would be called “blessed” as opposed to “adulteress?”

So her song continues:

“His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.”

These are words that do not fit into our American idea of Christmas. As a matter of fact, if we are honest with ourselves, we despise these words of Mary. Because it points a finger directly at you and me. For we have constructed, with the help of advertising, a sanitized Christmas that ignores the harsh realities that Mary knew so well.

You see, these words of Mary are words of revolution, words that turn the world upside down. Here we have a person with little or no hope singing words that few would dare to utter. Mary sings of a hope based upon a God who enters our world in the most unlikely form, using the most unlikely people, and who promises to usher in a new kingdom that is not of this world.

She sings of her hope, where the poor will be lifted up and those who oppress them will be scattered. She sings of a time when all will recognize their total dependence on God. And the proud, those who insist on their own self-sufficiency, will be scattered.

Indeed, Mary sings for ordinary people who do not always have it all together – people who recognize that they need a sense of hope that comes from outside of themselves. In some ways we are a lot like Mary and the shepherds.

We are in a line with a lot of other unworthy people: David the adulterer, Jacob the con-artist, Matthew the crooked government employee, Peter the denier, Thomas the doubter, Paul the murderer.

We are the gossips, the thieves, the proud, the selfish, the grumps and the malcontents. You and I, just more unworthy people through whom God seeks to redeem the world by turning it upside down.

Just how absurd is that? And what is even more absurd is that God calls us, you and me, to be a part of the saving of the world. That is, unless we insist, because of our pride, to try and do it on our own. If that is the case, we will be sent away empty.

What an amazing opportunity. Our Lord has come to our aid and even more than that, wants us to be a part of the salvation of the world. I ask you to WATCH this Christmas. KEEP ALERT.

For we come expecting the fulfillment of all of our desires – the confirmation of all of our prejudices and preconceptions. We come looking for a cute and cuddly child lying in a manger who has come to serve us. But instead we find the Savior of the world who comes to turn our lives upside down.

So take care as you gaze into the manger. Beware of coming too close to this Savior. Think, before you hold out your hands to receive his body and blood through the bread and the wine. For this is the one who comes to turn the world upside down. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.
Amen.