

Here and There: ... This is the last bulletin of 2014, so you might want especially to save its **Calendar of Events**. Do keep track of the **Church Christmas Party**, the **Christmas Cookie Swap** and the **Christmas Eve Vigil**. ... Kudos to **Eddie** and **Laconia** and the **Sing-Along Ensemble** for another great **A Cappella Christmas Carol Sing Along**, effortlessly (it seems) filling the building yet again. Also our special thanks to all who worked behind the scenes in preparation for this evening and then during the evening all the way through to final clean-up. ... Join us on Sunday mornings at 10:00 o'clock for our "**The Story We Find Ourselves In**" class which meets downstairs and traces the biblical story from Genesis through Revelation, highlighting those passages that help us identify and understand the big story of which our life stories are a part. We're just starting into the New Testament and we're currently looking at a very seasonal consideration of Jesus' birth starting with "A Woman in Crisis" drawn from Matthew 1:18-25. Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus is so familiar and loved that we sometimes forget it begins with – of all things – a genealogy laced with references to women in trouble. And so the story of Jesus begins! And join us this Wednesday evening, December 10th, when **The Jesus Class** discusses "The Birth of Jesus According to the Gospel of Luke."... Our **Church Book Club** meets next on Friday evening, January 9th at 7:30 PM to discuss the novel **Purple Hibiscus** by the very accomplished Nigerian-born author, Cimamanda Ngozi Adichie. ... Some of you may also be interested in the **Interfaith Book Club** that meets here usually on the fourth Thursday evenings of school months. It's a fascinating group of people from very diverse backgrounds who have learned together to have interfaith discussions at the very highest level. For more information see Dale.



December 14, 2014

This Week at Stamford Church of Christ

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How Advent Came to Mary: Part Three

Reflections on Luke 1:46-56

Very early in the Gospel of Luke, after Gabriel has announced the birth of Jesus to her, Mary breaks out into "My soul glorifies the Lord." This section (1:46-55) is called a song, and the song is called the **Magnificat** from the opening word in the Latin Vulgate version for "glorifies." In it, Mary draws from Scripture. It's reminiscent, for instance, of Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, but these are not direct quotes. Instead, it's what comes out of a heart immersed in Scripture. Mary sees it all now. God has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. It's all making the point: Nothing is impossible with God.

Of course it's easy today to sentimentalize the birth of Jesus and not notice that Mary is a woman in trouble with a lot to explain: a pledge to be married; a pregnancy she cannot explain; and then a sudden disappearance. Has she even told Joseph yet? My guess is: She hasn't. She just gets out of town. And even as she composes this song, she still doesn't know how to tell him. What will she say? How can she possibly reassure him? Is there any chance he will believe her? Or is it all off? Will she raise this child alone? Or worse,

will she be stoned to death as an adulteress? To her credit, she somehow gets her mind off her predicament, off her own numbing anxieties, her fear, her embarrassment, the very real difficulties of her situation – and she glorifies the Lord. "He has done great things for me! From now on all generations will call me blessed." Have you ever wondered what great things may be happening all around you, and in your fearfulness, your sense of crisis, maybe just the daily grind of worry, you missed them all?

In any case, Mary's song is a kind of heroism, a rising to the occasion against great odds, a rising up out of the trouble to seeing that God is doing great things. And now she is ready for the trouble, for the tough times, the uncertainty, and the danger of her life, because she understands God and what God is doing. She sees a coming great reversal. She sees that God is mindful of (he was paying attention to) the humble state of his servant, that he scatters the proud, brings down rulers, lifts up the humble, fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty. This, in fact, runs as a sub-theme all through the Gospel of Luke. "Blessed are you who are poor. ... Woe to you who are rich" (6:20, 24). Jesus defines his own ministry as very specifically preaching good news to the poor (4:18). The person who devotes his life to building bigger barns so that he might take

PEOPLE GROWING THROUGH THE LOVE OF JESUS.

life easy and eat, drink and be merry is a fool (Luke 12:13-21). One day there will be a great reversal: The first will be last, and the last will be first, and the rich man who ignores the beggar at his door will in the life to come exchange places with him (16:19-31).

But surely God doesn't prefer poor people. Surely he's simply saying that it's the poor who feel their own neediness, grasp their own dependence on God, and find their way more quickly to God. Maybe. Maybe not, because Scripture does in fact say that God has a special concern for the poor, and the Hebrew prophets make very clear that God cares passionately about justice and cares passionately that we do justice (Hosea 12:6; Amos 5:15; Micah 6:8; Isaiah over and over again). You see, Scripture has no notion (as we do in America) of justice as a blindfolded woman administering justice "impartially," abstractly, in some disembodied way that takes no account of the person in front of her and that person's unique circumstances. In fact, both Scripture and real life suggest that there is no place for neutrality or detachment on things like this, because neutrality gives tacit support to the already powerful. The prophets hear the groans of the suffering and proclaim a God who is biased toward the powerless, toward those whose voices are excluded. "The Lord watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow" (Psalm 146:7-9). Justice demands that we see beyond the perspective of the powerful and "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute" (Proverbs 31:8). Moreover, the word on this must get out if we ever hope to have a future we can all trust.

This is what Mary is saying: that God is paying attention to the humble state of his servants, that he scatters the proud, brings down rulers, lifts up the humble, fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty. A time is coming when Lazarus, the beggar outside the door, covered with sores, eating scraps from the rich man's table, does better than the rich man, expensively dressed in the latest fashions, wasting his days in conspicuous consumption. It's what Jesus says over and over again: that he is creating a new humanity where grace reigns, where trust operates, where things are worked out in love and trust, and not in fear and anger, where the one who would be great becomes the servant, and the first become last and the last first, a new humanity where people do not obsess over

domination and subordination, over who is greatest and who has authority over whom. That's what Mary realizes – even in the midst of her very difficult circumstances – that God brings down rulers and lifts up the humble. And for there to be a future we can trust, that is the Gospel – the great good news – the whole earth must hear.

To children growing up on the mean streets of inner-city America, to those hundreds of millions of people on this planet who go to bed hungry every night, to the victims of 9/11 as well as to young men in Palestinian refugee camps or in cities throughout the Middle East, unemployed and consequently not marriageable, knowing the opulence of the West and feeling that progress has passed them by, while all the time seething themselves under repressive local regimes, this is the Gospel: God brings down rulers and lifts up the humble.

The truth is: A future we can trust can never happen where God is not trusted. There has to be a strong notion in the minds of men and women across the earth, but especially in the hearts of those who are weighed down by life, struck by the injustices they witness, feeling themselves part of a civilization in decline, envious of another class or culture, tempted to take matters into their own hands, attracted to the angry call of jihad, or vengeance in any form, that God – not them, not America and not them – is in control. Peace on earth absolutely depends on faith on earth. A future we can trust depends on faith on earth. Paul was right: It really is a matter of faith from first to last. People have to become more trusting. The salvation of the world depends on this, people knowing when to act and when to wait, but never, never acting out of fear or hatred or a thirst for revenge, people skilled in the arts of forgiveness and grace and trust and, yes, love for the enemy.

The way that Jesus teaches is the way. And this word must go out. Our momentary troubles in our world today are in many ways the consequences of centuries of not getting the word out that God is trustworthy, that he cares, that he watches over our coming and going, that he is mindful of the humble state of his servants, that he hears those who cannot speak for themselves and responds to the groaning of the suffering, that he brings down rulers from their thrones and lifts up the humble. We have been too busy with our own work, with our own houses, with

Sunday Mornings Coming Up! 11:00 AM

Dec 14 THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT: "Good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:1-14)
Dec 21 FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT: "Magi from the east" (Matthew 2:1-12) (Naomi)

Calendar of Events

Sat., Dec. 13

Workshop in Wonder. *"Cultivating Wonder Through Nature and Poetry."* 9:30 AM-12:00 PM. Led by Susan Ernst. Exploring the natural world around us and seeing what it has to teach us in this Advent season. Through observation, reflection and prompts, and with the aid of Scripture and quotes, learning to write poetry to give words to our experience. Contact Susan at susan@susan-ernst.com or 203/767-7743.

Sun., Dec. 14

Housewarming Potluck. At noon following morning services. At Laura Lopez's new home at 44 King Street in Norwalk. Bring your favorite dishes and maybe stay for a while to help Laura get settled in.

Fri., Dec. 19

Church Christmas Party. At the Ramachandran's, 6:30 PM. The dinner is potluck: if your last name begins with A-H, bring hors d'oeuvres and salads; if I-Q, main dishes; and if R-Z, desserts and drinks. And there will be a **Gift Exchange** but only gifts from your attic, basement or re-gift stash. Do not buy anything! And there'll also be a bit of **Talent Show**, though there are other rooms where you can hide from the talent show!

Sun., Dec. 21

Christmas Cookie Swap. In Community Room I after morning services. Wrap your cookies in clear packets of four, and take away as many packets as you bring.

Wed., Dec. 24

Christmas Eve Vigil. 5:00-6:00 PM in the sanctuary.

Wed., Dec. 31

Come and Go New Years Eve Party at James Zurzola's. Starting at 7:30 PM. For kids and adults.

Sun., Jan. 4

First Sunday 2015. Including presentation of the 2015 Plan of Action.

our own families, and with our own religious traditions to get this word out. Instead of insisting that the whole world must align itself with some particular doctrine we hold, it is this word – that God can be trusted – that must go out.

What the world needs to know is what Mary knew when Advent came to her.

– Dale Pauls

Prayer Concerns ... **Anna Andrews**, pain and weakness in her hips and left knee and some GI problems; still in job search though she's found a small part-time job ... a **friend of Scott Keating**, seriously struggling with depression ... **Maggie's sister Nancy**, recovering at home from recent surgery ... **Antoinette Fraioli**, Jeanne Fraioli's mother-in-law, home again after a long hospitalization ... **Gillian Bigby**, for a safe and healthy pregnancy... **Anna Andrews**, in her job search ... **Danny Monroe**, the husband of Linda Sykes's work partner, Elle, in probably late stages of lung cancer ... **Veronica's sister, Beverly**, undergoing chemo for breast cancer ... **Sharon Jones**, with return of her MS symptoms ... **Frank Zurzola**, in rehab in St. Camillus Center on Elm Street here in Stamford ... **Luz Manso**, Kelly Edwards tenant, continuing to struggle with heart, lung and kidney issues ... **Judy Dante**, a friend of Gillian Green, 31-years-old, who suffered a heart episode, and now is on a pacemaker and a heart transplant list; Judy has two young daughters ... **Doreen Casseley**, Veronica's mother in Jamaica with difficulty breathing ... **Tom Konobeev**, Aaron Andrew's friend, having suffered kidney failure and on dialysis, making progress in his weight loss in order to have transplant surgery, and both **Tabitha** and **Tom Konobeev** who are now taking care of Tabitha's mother suffering from early onset dementia ... ALSO continue to pray for: **communities struggling with violence in America, the peoples of Haiti and throughout the Muslim world, especially those in Syria and Iraq, also those in West Africa and now Texas suffering from the Ebola virus and those who are treating them.**

Our Sympathies go to the family of **Richard Bailey** who died in the prime of life Tuesday, November 25th. Funeral services will be at the Lesko/Polke Funeral Home, 1209 Post Rd., in Fairfield this Friday, December 12th at 10:30 AM.