

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, Virginia
December 11, 2011

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11
Luke 1:46b–55

MIDWIVES OF THE INCARNATION

What an amazing week this has been. One of our own—and we say that humbly and yet also with great pride—was awarded the Nobel prize yesterday. We received the announcement weeks ago that Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of Liberia and sister of member Carney Johnson, was one of the people chosen to receive the award; and she received the award yesterday. She shared this with two other women of action. You see, yesterday was the anniversary of Alfred Nobel's death. Most years, on December 10, the prize is awarded. It has grown in value. It is now worth 1.5 million dollars. When three people receive it, it's divided equally.

Today we read about Elizabeth and Mary. They are also women of action—women who were extremely vulnerable in the same way that all three of the Nobel Peace Prize recipients were at one time vulnerable in their own country. It's interesting that in her speech, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf called upon women everywhere to find their voice. Isn't this what Mary does as she knocks on the door of Elizabeth's house and they greet one another? She finds her voice to tell a beautiful, yet poignant story. Yes, it is lyrical in its construction, but it is a story that carries the message of John the Baptist and Jesus and we also know that it is a story that is filled with disturbing news.

It's very clear how Mary feels as she shares this wonderful song with us. They share that moment in seclusion (Mary possibly to escape the gossip; Elizabeth just to be very careful with this her first pregnancy for a woman advanced in age)—a secluded moment where they celebrate the gift—God's gift—not only of new life, but the salvation God is giving to the whole world, Advent and Christmas. They are about God's intervening in human history for our well-being. These women exhibit the potential of humanity when cooperating with a power greater than ourselves.

These partners have their own struggles at home. Zechariah is dumbfounded, literally, at the news. And Joseph is concerned with the logic of what's taken place. But as midwives of God's salvation, Elizabeth and Mary were more concerned with logistics. They are less concerned than their husbands with public perception. They are more concerned with personal devotion and obedience. In essence, Elizabeth and Mary boil down this season to what can only be explained when we go beyond reason, beyond what is rational. Madeleine L'Engle wrote: "This is the irrational season, when love blooms bright and wild." Had Mary been filled with reason, there would have been no room for the child.

We talk incessantly about being the living, breathing body of Christ. We talk about the church as being the embodiment of God's incarnation with us, in the flesh. And we do well to look at the contrast in reaction as the story unfolds, as the news is shared. The women who are to become the midwives of redemption work with God's mysterious un-

folding plan in spite of disobedience all around them, in spite of the confusion. Remember, Elizabeth is dealing with a mute husband now, until John is born. And Joseph has already made plans to cut his losses and walk away. But Elizabeth and Mary choose to accept one another, to be a blessing to one another, to believe in one another, to encourage one another, to dream what God might do through them.

Today when you conclude the congregational meeting and are leaving the sanctuary, you will be given a synthesis of our New Beginnings gatherings. Someone at the 8:30 service was shocked at how much information was included. In this New Beginnings report, the discussions of eight different small groups totaling over 100 people has been boiled down; and they are offered to us as a word of encouragement, but only if we choose to see them the way Elizabeth and Mary used their circumstances. Someone has said everything in the report isn't the gospel—it's just what was talked about. And in truth, this report synthesis is the beginning—the beginning, not the ending, not the conclusion, not the marching orders—of conversations we will have over and over again in coming months. If you don't do well with pregnancy, you won't do well with this report. Things are still unfolding. But if you see the gift and the wonder that a new beginning can bring, you will do just fine.

If I could bless our church with any blessing this Christmas, I would give us the confidence to believe in one another, to believe in our value, our worth within God's kingdom. God has chosen us as instruments so that others can experience the reversal of misfortune, Isaiah says. We are a people who still believe God can make whole our broken world, our broken lives. We are midwives of the image of Christ in one another. Elizabeth and Mary are very certain about their vocation, about their biblical mandate to start where they are to use what they have as they minister, first to each other, and then to the world around them.

Maybe what we need to make sense of this New Beginnings synthesis and the process—maybe what we need is a song like Mary's. We had one when we started the Building Campaign, remember? *Grace Alone*—we sang it over and over, and it encouraged us. Maybe we should find a song like the *Magnificat* that will inspire us to be reborn, born anew, born from above in the midst of the human need surrounding us. Would we be willing to sing a song together—a song about light coming forth from darkness, about joy being birthed despite grief, about God bringing life out of death?

God has favored us as surely as God favored Mary. Christ has been conceived in you and in me. And we are alternately becoming God-bearers and midwives for one another. What an extraordinary privilege, what a high calling, what an awesome vocation—midwives for other God-bearers. We can't make it our new statement of faith. We can't make it even the slogan because it would confuse so many people. But we get it, don't we—allowing Christ's image to become a reality in one another? If not, then allow these next few moments to be a time when God speaks to your heart and makes it clear just as he did for Mary and for Elizabeth.

So let us worship the Lord.