

Advent 4a
Luke 1:5-25, 57-80

December 22, 2019
Salem, Bridgeport

A long time ago in a place far away, in an obscure village in Judea, God spoke.

You'll remember from years of Sunday School, Adult Education, and sermons, that the faith we practice began a long time ago in a place far away. God the creator of all that exists invited a man and his wife to trust the promise he had given and travel to a place unnamed. And Abram and Sarai left the community they'd known since birth and took off in an entirely new direction.

In the gospel we have just heard read, the inspired writer tells us of a new faith being introduced to people who were unprepared for such a change in their lives. Two women become pregnant, one old and married without children for all her years, the other young and betrothed but not yet married. Of course, we're talking about Elizabeth and Mary. We know Mary's story; today our reading gives us a look behind the scenes at how the birth of Jesus affected the wider world.

All her life, through who knows how many years of marriage, Elizabeth bore a burden no woman wants to experience. In her time, if a marriage produced no children, the woman was labeled barren, and that gave her husband the right to divorce her and look for someone else to bear him an heir. Zechariah and Elizabeth didn't want that to happen to them, so Elizabeth gave her husband her handmaid with whom to produce an heir. The child was intended to be raised by the married couple and would eventually inherit all they had.

They thought they had everything all figured out. But one day when Zechariah was serving in the Temple, doing the most sacred job a priest could ever do, a vision came to him. When the angel Gabriel spoke to him, the old man just couldn't believe his words. All his life he and Elizabeth had hoped for a child, and now – in their old age – a heavenly messenger had told him God would answer their prayers.

*The entire story of God's covenant relationship with Israel, beginning with the

promise to Abraham and Sarah, is coming to fulfillment in this story Luke tells – this story that begins, once again, with a promise and a birth against all odds. Fulfillment has been a long time coming. Israel has been through wars, captivity. Exile, and domination by foreign rulers, and in Luke's time has been crushed by the Romans.

As we remember how God has proven faithful in the past – even when all hope seemed lost – builds confidence that God can be trusted in the present and the future. Even while Herod and Caesar ruled with an iron fist, God's reign of justice and mercy was breaking into this world in the unlikely births of two infants in obscure Judean villages – John, to be known as the baptizer, and Jesus, known to the faithful as the Messiah, the Christ.

There are times in our lives today, and in our life together as God's people, when problems mount and it's difficult to see a way forward, when it seems as though all hope for the future has reached a dead end. But in the Bible, we are encountered by a God for whom there are no

dead ends – detours, maybe – but not dead ends. In Scripture we are encountered by a God who always works for good, even when we mess things up, a God who specializes in making a way in the wilderness, opening a future when none seems possible.

Often, we don't understand God's ways or God's timing. We may be filled with doubt and tempted to lose hope. But our story of faith reminds us that God always proves faithful in the end, turning despair to hope, doubt to faith, sorrow to laughter and rejoicing. God proves faithful by working in unexpected ways and through unlikely candidates, even such unlikely candidates as you and me. God works against all odds – despite our weaknesses, despite our doubts, despite our resistance, to create faith in us and to accomplish God's purposes. *

Those two infants born a long time ago in a place far away, were set apart to fulfill God's plan for the salvation of all that exists. You and I today, right here, by our baptism, have been set apart to carry on with God's plan, trusting in the one

who created all to provide the best future for us and this world where we live. We may be surprised at what God has in store for us. Our best laid plans may come to nothing. But that just may be because God has something brand new in mind, a new way for us to proclaim God's never-ending love for all. Let us pray that God's will may be done and let us go forward proclaiming God's love to each one we meet. Amen

* Sermon largely influenced by commentary found in the ELCA publication *Sundays and Seasons* online.