

**SERMON FOR YEAR C, ADVENT 4**  
LUKE 1:39-55  
BY THE REV. TOREY LIGHTCAP  
SAINT THOMAS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
DECEMBER 20, 2009  
"UNSURE"

We should begin by admitting our possible confusion.  
John the Baptist has been out and doing these past weeks, hasn't he?  
Now he's back in the womb,  
Practically answering the question of Nicodemus, when he asks Jesus  
*If anyone can really enter his mother's womb a second time.*  
Well, if there's any confusion, it should be entirely ours.  
The planner of the lectionary was interested in our having some time with Mary today,  
And that meant turning the clock back, turning back pages in the Gospel of Luke.

Wouldn't it be something if we could suspend our perceptions about John the Baptist ...  
Wouldn't it really be something, if we were to allow ourselves to know  
Only just this much of his story,  
As though we were reading Luke *for the first time ever* and got to this part  
Where Mary and Elizabeth came together as family  
After Mary, young and pregnant and scared, made this dangerous trip  
Even further into the backwaters of the countryside –  
Wouldn't be amazing if we could really read it and not know?

What if we didn't know, not just about John, but about how *all of it* was going to turn out?  
What if we didn't possess the smug, dangerous warmth of our presuppositions  
That knowing the story sometimes gives us?  
What if we didn't have the entitlements of knowledge  
And the whole thing were stripped down to this moment  
When a couple of young women greet one another  
And who are they, and why should we care?  
What if we didn't have the history of religion,  
But only, as they say, *the facts on the ground.*

I should think the story would come at us with much greater power  
If we could, just for a moment, let it have its way  
And not control it with the knowledge of outcomes.

One answer: We would see how lowly these women really are;  
We would know definitively what it feels like to be on the bottom of society,  
And to be secretly lifted up,  
And we would stare with eyes wide-open and say, *My God! They have been liberated!*  
We might rethink what it means to "be saved" ... *from something, for something.*

A few months ago, on a lark, I got out my non-digital single-lens reflex camera.  
Ah, now talk about old-school!  
I think, perhaps, I might have been getting tired of the whole instant-gratification thing.

The camera is a real beaut.  
It operates exactly the same way it always has, with perfect workmanship.  
It's heavy, and when its shutter clicks, it's not just playing a pre-recorded sound  
That my brain needs to hear; it's actually the shutter working. (Imagine that!)  
On the back, of course, is a cover that swings out to put in film  
(You remember film, don't you?),  
And on the outside of that cover is not a screen showing me what I just took a picture of,  
But instead a holder where I can slide in a panel that I've torn off the film box  
That helps me remember what settings to use.

I can use this camera – and this lens in particular – without the slightest hesitation.  
I can manipulate it however I like, almost from muscle memory.  
It was left to me by my stepfather, who liked good things,  
And who would be proud to know how it's been used for the past 19 years.

But only in the past week have I noticed a certain tension.  
I *think* I'm taking great pictures with this camera – photos of kids and things –  
But it's been so long since I've used it, that I don't actually know if I have any film in it!  
In the meantime, I'm getting off some great shots.

Would you like to participate in this experiment this morning with me?  
Okay, wait a second, and then smile ... watch the birdie!

If there was actually any film in it, it's going to be great. Do you prefer glossy or matte?  
What do you think, really?  
Is it going to turn out? Is there any film in the camera?  
My instinct tells me there is, but that's all I'm operating on.  
I could be wrong. You could be wrong.

That's pretty small stakes, isn't it?  
Sure; we'll gamble on whether there's any film in the camera. We'll play that game.

But if I were some sort of Hollywood director,  
And proposed a \$100 million movie be shot *without or without film in the camera*,  
I'd be thrown onto the first train home.  
If I were the president of a bank, and I advertised that my bank  
*May or may not* have a vault,  
How long would I keep my job?  
Would you eat in a restaurant whose health certificates state  
That it *could* have been regularly inspected?  
Would you drive a car that *might* have brakes?

And in the end, it's all small stakes compared to today ...  
The *Prophet* of the Most High? And the *Savior himself* .... ?!

History and knowledge were not there to comfort and guide Mary and Elizabeth.  
They were there to comfort and guide one another,  
And, of course, the Living Ones within them, and the God who hallows and cheers.

So, in a sense, *of course* Mary is given this canticle.  
She has no special, futuristic knowledge of how it's all going to turn out.  
To suggest she does is just bad religion.  
Martin Luther meditated upon this moment,  
And he wrote that the lowliness of Mary reveals the hiddenness of God.

Yes, this lowly moment is tender – but it's not Hallmark/McDonald's/Disney-tender.  
It's tender because these young women –

Some of the lowest of the low – have awoken  
To a sense of being cared for and loved by A Something  
Which is both beyond them and closer *to* them than their very breath,  
That same Something whose song of creation echoes not just in them,  
But that rings into every immeasurable corner of the universe ...  
The Something – Yawheh, Jehovah, the Lord Almighty and Merciful –  
That cuts across all insecurities –  
Not with guarantees and promises about the future,  
But with the surety of presence,

Which we, in our feeble way, call relationship with God come into the world.  
The enfleshment of the Christ is therefore not the end of suffering,  
But the end of fear.

*Fear not, for I am with you; I have called you by name; you are mine.*

That's grace ... tender, durable grace.  
"Christmas is by grace," Frederick Buechner wrote.  
"Christmas is by grace. It could not have survived otherwise."

You know, in the moment, you can only accept grace;  
You don't dare posture that you're worthy to receive it,  
And you don't dare grovel that you *aren't* worthy to receive it;  
That's a losing game.

Sooner or later, though, grace demands a response.  
One of the ways we respond to grace is through baptism.  
Today we have Ethan Earl Cain, not even a toddler, come for this.  
Come to witness that *It is God who lifts up the helpless* and fills them with good things.

Only, Ethan cannot say this for himself; he is not accountable, not mature, can't speak.  
He has been brought by his parents and his sister and grandparents and godparents,  
And, in point of fact, by all of us.  
All of us will witness this, and all of us will promise to do right by him for Christ's sake.

Yet we do not know, just as we never know, what will come to pass –  
What chances and changes will come his way in life.  
We only know that at some point, the responsibility for how he responds to grace  
Will pass from us to him.

If we have been faithful to him in Christ, then he will be faithful to Christ by us.  
There's no short-cutting it.

We're making big, world-turning promises for Ethan today.  
We're initiating him into something massive.

With all due respect,

We don't know, in effect, whether there's any film in the camera.

We never know; we *can't*.

That happens every time the Church, with all her beautiful faults,

Has the audacity to baptise, or ordain, or marry, or pronounce forgiveness, or teach.

Yet this is our work.

Praise be –

That insecurity puts us right in line with Mary and Elizabeth, doesn't it,

Women who, like us, bear the light of the world.

We stand with them, shoulder to proud shoulder, pilgrims throughout time,

Recipients and heirs of a relationship with God come into the world.

So come, Emmanuel.

And with fear and trembling, and standing on solid ground, let us baptise.