

Weekly Reading – Monday, December 14, 2009

And so the lessons for Advent IV, Sunday, December 20, are already upon us. John the Baptist is behind us (to the relief of many I am sure), and we join Mary and Elizabeth in joyful anticipation. My grandmother used to speak of "having the anticipates," meaning she was keenly excited, looking forward, to some anticipated event. This time of year the anticipates seem half or more than half the joy.

Micah 5: 2 - 5a

In some measure anticipation rests on previous experience, memory driving and deepening hope. So it is here as Micah's hope rests on the long story of David and God's promise to the tiny ancestral village of the shepherd-king. There's a bit of a polemic at work here. Judgment comes to proud Jerusalem (5: 1) center of power and privilege. Grace comes to the least, to "tiny Bethlehem." From Bethlehem shall come forth the promised one, one who shall stand and "feed his flock in strength of the Lord." Just so history and memory shape future hope. The new shall be new and yet continuous with God's previous work and grace. As surprising and as familiar as a newborn child.

Hebrews 10: 5 - 10

And yet here (in Hebrews), the future hope is juxtaposed to and in some measure also a critique of the past. Past is the cult of sacrifice. Future is the once and for all work of Christ, a priest forever. I'm not sure this is, or should be made into, super-sessionism, or cast as Christianity versus Judaism. It is more a religion of grace versus a religion of works. The old order (still much alive) required relentless sacrifices to "win" the favor of God, to propitiate an angry deity. The new order is one where in Christ, God comes to us and is for us, taking our side and our life in the flesh, promising never to leave us. Thus, we can stop our efforts to "win" God's favor and live trusting God's grace and love.

Luke 1: 39 - 55

Here are two women who are living joyfully, trusting God's grace and love, and the power of this God to do a new and amazing thing. So many strands of the previous readings are caught up in this one. Tiny Bethlehem becomes Mary, maid of low estate. The mighty are cast down and the lowly raised up by the God of great reversals. And in Hebrews, the incarnation, "the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all," is carried in Mary's womb, fully incarnational, no separate spiritual realm. One imagines being in the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth, where the women sang in joy and no other sound/ voice was heard for Zechariah had been struck dumb (see chapter one) for doubting Gabriel. Some sort of early feminist thing going on here! The word "leaping" appears a couple times as babies leap in wombs. This is surely the sign of a powerful Other, of grace, at work, intruding. There is another power at work, something the pregnant woman knows, something the expectant family knows. So now on the edge of Christmas we are all invited to be that expectant family, confident that there is another power at work in the world, bringing new hope, life and possibility to us and for us.