

Sandra Stogsdill Brown
Good Things
Sermon for 3rd Sunday in Advent, Year B
December 17, 2017
Luke 1:47-55

Our scripture reading this morning begins just after the angel Gabriel has paid a visit to a young woman named Mary. Gabriel has announced that Mary has found favor with God, that the Holy Spirit will come upon her, so that even though she is a virgin, she will bear a son whose kingdom will have no end, a son who will be called the Son of God. And Mary says . . . Yes. And then she quickly sets out to visit her relative Elizabeth, who is six months pregnant with the baby who will become John the Baptist. Elizabeth is delighted to see her and blesses her, and Mary bursts into a song of praise. Hear now the word of the Lord as it comes to us from Luke 1:47-55:

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”
And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

“He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

When is the last time you were really, really hungry?

If you’ve been worshiping here regularly for the past several years, you know that about once a year, you can count on my sharing a story from one of the books in the Little House on the Prairie series, by Laura Ingalls Wilder. Today’s story comes from the book Farmer Boy, which is about a year in the life of Almanzo Wilder, when he was 9 years old and growing up in

New York state. As a growing boy who works hard on the farm, Almanzo is always hungry.

The custom in those days was for the father to fill everyone's plate at the table, beginning with guests and adults and then the children, from oldest to youngest (this was back in the days when children were also to be seen and not heard). Since he is the youngest, Almanzo is always served last. Here is his experience of Christmas dinner one year (I hope you all ate breakfast today):

Almanzo bowed his head and shut his eyes tight while Father said the blessing. It was a long blessing, because this was Christmas Day. But at last Almanzo could open his eyes. He sat and silently looked at that table.

He looked at the crisp, crackling little pig lying on the blue platter with an apple in its mouth. He looked at the fat roast goose, the drumsticks sticking up, and the edges of dressing curling out. . .

He looked at the big bowl of cranberry jelly, and at the fluffy mountain of mashed potatoes with melting butter trickling down it. He looked at the heap of mashed turnips, and the golden baked squash, and the pale fried parsnips.

He swallowed hard and tried not to look anymore. He couldn't help seeing the fried apples'n' onion, and the candied carrots. He couldn't help gazing at the triangles of pie, waiting by his plate; the spicy pumpkin pie, the melting cream pie, the rich, dark mince oozing from between the mince pie's flaky crusts.

He squeezed his hands together between his knees. He had to sit silent and wait, but he felt aching and hollow inside.

All grown-ups at the head of the table must be served first. They were passing their plates, and talking, and heartlessly laughing. The tender pork fell away in slices under Father's carving-knife. The white breast of the goose went piece by piece from the bare breast-bone. Spoons ate up the clear cranberry jelly, and gouged deep into the mashed potatoes, and ladled away the brown gravies.

Almanzo had to wait to the very last. He was youngest of all, except Abner and the babies and Abner was company.

At last Almanzo's plate was filled. The first taste made a pleasant feeling inside him and it grew and grew, while he ate and ate and ate. He ate till he could eat no more, and he felt very good inside. For a while he slowly nibbled bits from his second piece of fruitcake. Then he put the fruity slice in his pocket and went out to play (Laura Ingalls Wilder, Farmer Boy, pp.323-325).

When is the last time you were really hungry?

I spent a lot of time this week pondering these words from Mary's song: "he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." I thought about how there's nothing like the feeling of being really hungry, and then sitting down to a wonderful meal, especially if

you are sitting with people that you love. There's a special appreciation for food when we're really hungry.

This past Thanksgiving, I hosted dinner in my home for some family and friends. Everything turned out really well—the dressing wasn't too dry, the green beans hit just the right balance between tender and crisp. But I didn't relish the food as much as I might have, because I was already full from eating a Thanksgiving dinner at my brother-in-law's house earlier in the day. Pie, though it looked and smelled delectable, was out of the question—I just couldn't do it. I'm guessing that most of us have probably had the experience of being offered something delicious, and having to turn it down because we were already full.

When Mary sings about the Lord filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty, it really makes you stop and think. It sounds great if you're someone who doesn't get enough to eat, but it sure sounds harsh for those of us who have plenty. And I wonder, how would Mary see someone like me? Would she see me as one of the hungry, or one of the rich? I've never had a day in my life where I worried about where my next meal would come from, or how I would feed my children, at least not yet. Have you? If we haven't, does that mean the Mighty One would send us away empty?

Maybe one of those great things the Mighty One does for us is to let us be empty sometimes. It is a blessing for those who are hungry to be filled, and it is also a blessing for those of us who have much to experience what it is like to be empty. Maybe that is what God's mercy looks like sometimes. Nobody appreciates a good meal like someone whose stomach is growling; nobody appreciates a friend like someone who's been lonely; nobody appreciates a job like someone who's been unemployed for a while; nobody appreciates good news like someone who has suffered.

When we're empty, we have room to welcome and embrace the presence of Christ in our lives. When our lives are overstuffed with activities, obligations, assets and gadgets, it's much harder, because those things take up so much room, and demand so much from us. The more time I spent with this passage this week, the more I began to see being sent away empty not as a punishment, but as a gift that sharpens our appetite for God, and deepens our compassion for, and solidarity with, those who don't have enough in this life.

When we know what it's like to be empty, Mary's song becomes not just a word of comfort, but of invitation and opportunity. God fills the hungry with good things, and who better to partner with God in filling hungry people than the Church? We at First Presbyterian also happen to be a church with a brand-new kitchen. We can be the downtown church that fills people with good things. Not only good food, although we certainly want to do that—but things that feed the soul, like good music, deep friendships, the transforming power of scripture and prayer, the space to be quiet and reverent, or joyfully irreverent, and a community that magnifies the Lord through its courageous hospitality and service.

When was the last time you felt empty? What good things are you hungry for? What are some things you need to let go of in order to receive the good things God wants to give us? What good things is God asking us to share? As we head into this final week of Advent, let us ponder Mary's song, and the part of our lives that are full, and the parts that are empty, and let us give thanks to the Mighty One who continues to do great things for us.