

**“Prepare the Way: Welcome”**  
Micah 5.2-5a, Luke 1.39-45

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Advent, Sunday Four: “Prepare the Way: Welcome.” As I wrote those words, and now as I speak them, I sensed a sort of wonder and awe; first, that we are so close to Christmas, and second, what an interesting journey Advent has been this year.

I shared with our Sunday evening Bible study group that this year, for the first in a long time, I’ve been more intentional about slowing down and taking time to notice God’s presence in the world around me. As a result, though I wouldn’t say I feel, yet, that excited sense of anticipation of being on the brink of something really special, I do have a sense of calm and peace and a more acute awareness of the presence of Emmanuel—God-with-us (God-with-me!). Looking at our Sunday scriptures with the focus of “Preparing the Way” through “Refine, Do, and Welcome” has helped keep my focus on what’s really important.

Today we look at preparing the way by centering on the word “Welcome.” At first it reminded me of one of those decorative mats we put outside our doors. It’s almost as if we are being scolded: no entry until you wipe your feet! No one with muddy boots or grass-covered shoes is allowed inside this home! Oh sure, we cute-sy up those mats to soften the message, but it still says, enter only if you aren’t going to mess up my floors...(and I’m as guilty of this as anyone else—I just bought a new mat with smiling snowmen!)

Well, I would hope that our congregations are more welcoming than that. We make jokes about “our seats” in the pews, but hopefully anyone who comes to worship is welcome to sit anywhere. And honestly, those examples are just superficial illustrations of welcome and hospitality. As Christ-lovers and disciples, our welcome must go deeper.

Our gospel lesson today from Luke provides an example of welcome between friends. When examined carefully, we see more than a casual meeting of two cousins. We can tell just from the brief encounter that Luke allows us to observe that the two women are more than just relatives. They are friends and soul mates as well. In this scene, Elizabeth is especially self-aware; when her baby “leaps” inside her at Mary’s arrival, Elizabeth interprets that as a greeting of joy and acknowledgment of Mary’s special mission as the mother of her Lord and Savior. Somehow, Elizabeth has already discerned Mary’s news. Elizabeth’s welcome of Mary was, for them, a natural response to their close relationship—not only with one another, but with God. As soon as Mary said hello, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. I love the way the Common English Bible translates her response to Mary’s greeting: “With a loud voice she blurted out, ‘God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry.’” This was a revelation she could not keep to herself!

One of the commentaries I sometimes use for studying the text had a paragraph so compelling I’m going to use it word for word: Charles Campbell writes: “The coming of the Messiah who will redeem Israel is anticipated and proclaimed, not by archangels or

high priests or emperors or even ordained preachers. Rather, two marginalized, pregnant women—one young, poor, and unwed, the other far beyond the age to conceive—meet in the hill country of Judea to celebrate (and possibly commiserate about) their pregnancies. A baby leaps in the womb. Blessings are shared. Astonishment is expressed. The story is not only odd and joyful; it is fleshy, embodied, earthy, appropriate as a forerunner to the incarnation... Two marginalized, pregnant women carry the future and proclaim the Messiah.”<sup>1</sup>

I’m always captivated and awed by how God uses just regular people, and even people no one else would think of asking to do anything really important. The scene between Elizabeth and Mary, at least for me, foreshadows the announcement of good news of great joy proclaimed to the shepherds, so that they are the first humans to broadcast the glorious event. As we hear the familiar story on Christmas Eve, we are often reminded that God chose those shepherds; dirty and smelly and probably looked down upon by most folks in that day—they were the ones people would cross to the other side of the street to avoid, if shepherds ever got to go “downtown.” God chose that ridiculously ordinary group of men to deliver the birth announcement!

Leave it to God to choose the most improbable folks to carry out God’s plan! A lady old enough to be a great-grandmother, having a baby? And a very young, unmarried, inexperienced child of a girl, also pregnant, with... the Savor of the world!? Recognizing how God so often chooses folks we wouldn’t consider “qualified” for the job brought me back to the word “welcome.”

God’s welcoming of strange people to do jobs critical to the mission of spreading love and offering grace to the world forces us to reflect on ways in which we, also, can be welcoming to folks who might otherwise be overlooked. I’m not thinking now of recruitment to fill vacant spots on committees or providing leadership for anything—though that may come as relationships develop. For now, I’m thinking simply about how God notices folks that others somehow don’t see, and wondering how we might be more intentionally welcoming in that same way.

We often equate “welcome” with hospitality, and the two do go hand in hand. But it’s more than shaking hands and being friendly and helping a visitor find a seat on Sunday morning. We must also see welcome in the context of preparing the way for Christ—and that goes further than a warm welcome to worship, as important as that is.

Last week our word was “Do,” and so if “Welcome” is a follow-up to that, it points to another form of discipleship. We must “acknowledge and warmly welcome those who visit our church, those we meet in our paths, those who are thirsting for love, fellowship, help, and counsel.”<sup>2</sup> If we truly want to be a part of preparing the way, we might think about new ways in which we can welcome others, and work toward the peace and justice that signifies God’s kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> (Cotto n.d.)(Campbell 2009)

<sup>2</sup> (Cotto 2018)

It's true that a lot of us are already doing a lot of good things, and we celebrate those things: providing food and financial contributions and delivery services for recipients of Hillsdale CARES, offering rides to appointments for those unable to drive, buying Christmas gifts for children who might otherwise not have any presents, contributing to the ministry of the Gideons, bringing folks to worship, filling cleaning buckets, and *many* other good works. We *are* doing many, many good things, but there is always opportunity to do more.

There are folks in our community who are hurting for a variety of reasons. Let us be thankful for the care we have offered this year, and look ahead to new ways we might be even more welcoming, offering the love of Christ.

Might we use Mary's song of praise to inspire us and energize us, as we prepare the way to welcome the Baby Jesus, our Lord and Savior, into the world?

### Mary's Song of Praise

<sup>46</sup> *And Mary<sup>[b]</sup> said,*

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,*

<sup>47</sup> *and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*

<sup>48</sup> *for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.*

*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;*

<sup>49</sup> *for the Mighty One has done great things for me,*

*and holy is his name.*

<sup>50</sup> *His mercy is for those who fear him*

*from generation to generation.*

<sup>51</sup> *He has shown strength with his arm;*

*he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

<sup>52</sup> *He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,*

*and lifted up the lowly;*

<sup>53</sup> *he has filled the hungry with good things,*

*and sent the rich away empty.*

<sup>54</sup> *He has helped his servant Israel,*

*in remembrance of his mercy,*

<sup>55</sup> *according to the promise he made to our ancestors,*

*to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

God promised a Savior, whose birth we anticipate and celebrate. We prepare the way to welcome him by welcoming others in his name. Let us pray for wisdom and strength; eyes to see and ears to hear so that we might welcome all God's children into the fellowship of love. Amen.

### **Works Cited**

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