

Advent IV - Year C
December 20, 2009
The Reverend Robert P. Travis

“Obedience”

Micah 5:2-5a, Psalm 80:1-7, Hebrews 10:5-10, Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

This Advent has been a different personal experience for me this year. As we await the celebration of the Son of God born into the world to Mary and Joseph, Jackie and I are awaiting the birth of our own son. While our son probably won't be born until February his gestation has become more intense this month, and as the time draws near it is becoming clear to me that our family, our lives are already changing, though they will change much more when he is with us. For Jackie, I believe, the change is already stronger than it is for me, as she experiences him growing inside her every day. His movements are real and present reminders which she notices regularly. And as any woman who has been pregnant knows, gestating a baby is an exercise in obedience. A woman must be obedient to the needs of her body, and the needs of her baby, in ways that are not so apparent when there is not a baby in the womb.

And as we all prepare for the exciting celebration of the baby Jesus being born for us, and looking forward to his returning in Glory, there is something else going on inside each of us, and I wonder if you have noticed it.

Our readings and collects allude to it today, and invite us to become aware of the gestation we are all involved in. This gestation also involves obedience, and it leads to our sanctification.

In our collect, we prayed that God would purify our conscience by his daily visitation. That process of purification, is very much like gestating a baby within us, because the further we go, in our walk with Christ living within us, the more obedient we are to him the more we become aware of his action within, and how we are being transformed by the God-bearing life.

Mary was the first God-bearer, the Theotokos, as she is called by Catholic and Orthodox Christians alike, but since Jesus' Ascension, we also become God-bearer's as we invite him to live within us.

Pregnant women experience change in their lives, as they're bodies are changed by growing their babies. I've experienced this, only vicariously of course, by seeing Jackie become more aware of what she eats, trying to eat healthier foods, that give our baby the nourishment he needs to grow. She also is aware of what she shouldn't eat, or medication she should avoid, and the need to get the right kind of exercise, to prepare her body for the birthing process. This involves a tremendous amount of obedience, to her needs and the baby's so that as much as we can control, things will work out well for both mother and baby.

Mary, the first God-bearer, had the blessing of learning obedience as a mother, at the same time she was learning it, as a follower of God. We see this in our Gospel reading today, as the two pregnant women, Mary and Elizabeth, encounter one another, and recognize their shared experience of blessing, and obedience. Elizabeth has that experience, that so many mothers can relate to, when her baby leaps in her womb, and while she doesn't know for sure, she attributes it to something she can understand, her own experience of the blessedness of Mary, at her greeting of her cousin. How often Jackie has turned to me and said, the baby just jumped, or kicked, he must have liked that!

But Mary and Elizabeth's experience is happening, on a deeper level as well, as through their gestation of these holy babies, who would become John the Baptist, and Jesus the Christ, they are being obedient to God, who has called them to this particular way of serving him, by bringing his servant and himself, into the world.

Through that process of obedience, they become sanctified, as Elizabeth acknowledges in the power of the Holy Spirit, "and why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" And notice that this experience of sanctification happened when they were together. While the growth of God within us, happens to us individually, we only realize it when we are together in a community of faithful people.

Mary and Elizabeth did not choose this plan, they probably did not even understand the fullness, of what was happening to them, or what they were going to experience and be a part of. But they said yes to God, and became obedient to whatever was to come, without any script or guarantee of how it would work out, though they trusted it would be according to God's will. And they experienced the development of their sanctification together.

Like that, with Christ growing inside each of us, we need to be aware of our actions daily, so that our lives will nourish his growth in our spirits. What are we feeding our spirits, as Christ grows within us? Are we aware of God within us on a daily basis? Or is it just on

Sundays that we become aware of his presence. Imagine what would happen, if a pregnant woman, only took care of the baby in her womb one day a week!?! When we practice the Christian life daily, we nourish the presence of Christ within us each day, and we become gradually more and more sanctified, made more and more holy as He is.

I find that the practice of Centering Prayer, is very helpful, in my own life, as a daily practice of recognition that Jesus is within me, and a daily giving over to Him, whatever He needs to make me more what He wants me to be. I have found that to be purifying my conscience, by God's daily visitation.

If you haven't done it before, the practice of Centering Prayer is easy to learn. It simply involves finding a quiet place, Then you sit in a comfortable upright position, with both feet on the floor (so you're less likely to fall asleep or need to move). You take a few deep breaths, close your eyes, and sit in silence. You use a sacred word - mine for Advent has been "Come Jesus" And the sacred word is repeated in your mind, in the silence. Whenever thoughts or distractions come, you return ever so gently to repeating your sacred word. I do this for twenty minutes each time, and I strive to do it twice every day.

I have found that when I commit to this simple practice, I become more aware of the presence of Jesus within me, and his action in my daily life. And even more, I find that the experience of sanctification through this prayer, becomes real to me in community, when I gather with our Centering Prayer group which prays together on Thursday afternoons.

This is one among many such daily practices. Some in our church faithfully say the prayers of the Daily Office, Morning and Evening prayer, and experience the sanctification of Christ through their daily prayer, especially when they gather to pray together. Some have other spiritual habits, which nourish their experience of Jesus' presence within them much as a mother nourishes her baby, by her careful pre-natal diet.

These daily intentional practices restore us, as they sanctify. Like in our Psalm, as the psalmist cries out to God, wondering when God will favor his people. The psalmist cries, "Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved." Jesus is the light of God's countenance, his true face among us, and it takes looking for him within, to see that God is restoring us every day.

Barbara Brown Taylor said: "You can decide to take part in a plan you did not choose doing things you do not know how to do for reasons you don't entirely understand. You can take part in a thrilling and dangerous scheme with no script and no guarantees. You can agree to smuggle God into the world, inside your own body."

Mary and Elizabeth did this, but others around us do this these days too. As I met with the Alpha Leadership team this week, I realized they are very much taking part in a thrilling and dangerous scheme, with no script or guarantees, and are willing to be God-bearers to those who will come in January.

Perhaps you are not sure, if you really want Jesus growing inside you, who is he really, and why would you want that? If you find yourself asking those kinds of questions, come on the Alpha Course in January and see if we can help you seek some answers.

But if you are ready, I invite you to participate in this sanctification by being obedient to the presence of God within you, and whatever he is calling you to do and be. As we approach the celebration of Christmas, become aware of Christ's growth in you.