

The Rev. Joel C. Daniels, PhD
Rector, The Nevil Memorial Church of St. George
Ardmore, Pennsylvania
The Third Sunday of Advent
December 15, 2019

Isaiah 35:1-10
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11
The Magnificat

Getting Ready for Jesus

The Book of Common Prayer, which gives us the text for our services of worship, is one of the great gifts of Anglicanism to the entire Christian world. Since first being assembled in original form in 1549, it has structured centuries of Anglican prayer. It has changed in lesser and greater ways over those centuries, but the main idea—common worship, in beautiful, Biblical language, based on ancient sources, in the vernacular of the people—has remained. Most all Episcopal churches keep the BCP in the pews, where it sits next to the hymnal, both well-thumbed.

What is not infrequently missing from those pews is the Bible. Now, that's not entirely true—the BCP is basically Biblical language, organized in a particular way—but it is true in a real, literal way. One of the things that Episcopalians are prone to miss, therefore, is how the Bible itself is set-up. A striking physical characteristic of the Bible is the way that the Old Testament is simply much, much longer than the New Testament. In fact, one of the ways that you can find the beginning of the New Testament is by opening the Bible to the middle, usually the psalms. Then open the second section to the middle again; that will usually get you to the gospels.

There is a lot in the Old Testament. The greatest hits—creation, Noah, the exodus—but a lot besides. There are 150 of the psalms that are found in the middle, and they have structured both Jewish and Christian worship since the time of King David. The group that is reading through the Epistle to the Hebrews right now has seen the way there are plenty of quotation from the psalms found throughout the New Testament; they are etched on the hearts of many faithful Jews and Christians.

King David himself is an interesting figure in Hebrew history. One great episode describes David “dancing ...with all his might” in front of the Ark of the Covenant when it is brought into Jerusalem (the city of David), the Ark being understood as the place where God resided (2 Samuel 6). It's not the only episode of dancing in the Old Testament either; there is the great story of Miriam and the women dancing after the exodus, once the Hebrews are through the Red Sea and the Egyptians chasing them have been drowned. There is a brief “song of Miriam” that represents what must have been a longer celebration (Exodus 15).

Back in the Book of Samuel, there is also a “song of Hannah” (1 Samuel 2), who was the mother of Samuel. She was given a child, even though she was past child-bearing age. Not only any child: Samuel would be one of the great prophets of Israel. Hannah consecrated Samuel to the Lord's service, and he would be an important part of the installation of David as king. Hannah's song celebrates what the Lord has done for her and would do for Israel.

There are two other famous women in the Old Testament whose child-bearing was most miraculous and to be significant in salvation history. One was Sarah, the wife of Abraham; it was the birth of Isaac, seemingly impossible, that started off Abraham's lineage, as God had promised him. The other was the mother of Samson, also promised a child even though she had been barren.

Samson, also consecrated to the Lord's service, would be the one who would save the Israelites from their archenemies, the Philistines.

There is a lot in the Old Testament.

I mention these episodes in particular, however, because all of them (and more) are specifically alluded to in our second reading from today, which we call the *Magnificat*, the Song of Mary. In the leaflet it has the title "Canticle 3," because that is how it appears in the Book of Common Prayer, during the service of Morning Prayer; it is also included in the service of Evening Prayer. Records indicate that the *Magnificat* has been used in corporate worship in this way since the eighth century.

The setting of the Magnificat is the visitation of Mary, the mother of Jesus, to Elizabeth, her relative and the mother of John the Baptist. Like Sarah, Elizabeth was beyond child-bearing years, but Gabriel, an angel of the Lord, had promised to her husband, Zechariah, that not only would they have a son, he would be incredibly important in the history of salvation: he would be the new Elijah, he would turn the people of Israel toward their God, and, the angel says specifically, "make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Like Samson, like Samuel, he would be consecrated to the Lord, to do the Lord's work.

Shortly thereafter, Gabriel appeared to Mary also, and told her that she would have a son—even though she wasn't married and hadn't known a man in the way that usually leads to conception. "Nothing will be impossible with God," Gabriel replies; the Spirit would take care of the conception, "overshadowing her," using the same words used when Moses goes to the mountain to meet God. Sure enough.

It is in that context that Mary goes to visit Elizabeth. But the miracles aren't finished. When Mary greets Elizabeth, the child in Elizabeth's womb "leaped for joy" in her womb, using the same word used for Miriam's dancing after the Exodus and King David's dancing in front of the Ark of the Covenant. This leads Elizabeth to say, "why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?" Somehow Elizabeth recognizes that Mary's son would be her Lord.

That is when Mary sings her song, the *Magnificat*. It mirrors, in a nearly exact way, the song of Hannah, the mother of Samuel. The emphasis on God's saving work, his overturning of the usual order of things, the fact that he keeps the promises he makes: put Hannah's song and Mary's song next to each other, and the similarities in language are extremely close. Mary also says that God has "shown strength with his arm," using the same words described in Exodus about what God did to the Egyptians.

I find all of these allusions fascinating, in part because I enjoy the detective work of figuring out where things in literature come from. I also like how it shows the incredibly mastery of St. Luke, both of language and of his scriptures. But there is another point there, too: during those thousands of years of Hebrew history, the stage was being set for the arrival of Jesus the Messiah, and when Jesus the Messiah actually arrived, the full importance of those earlier events came into focus.

Let me put it another way: one of the things that was happening for those centuries upon centuries—with Abraham and David and Samson and Hannah and Elijah and all the rest—was that Israel was being prepared for the coming of Jesus. It was in a time they could not have predicted, in a manner, to a person, they could not have predicted. But just as the forty years in the wilderness prepared the Israelites to become possessors of Israel, the Promised Land, so all the stories and characters we find in the Old Testament were preparing them to understand what was happening when Jesus came for the first time. Mary was one in a long line of women through whom God showed that he could bring life out of situations in which life was impossible. Not only Isaac, not only Samson or Samuel—not even only Mary. When God raised Jesus from the dark womb of the tomb, he showed that he could, and does, make life possible when hope seems to be lost. God can

make marvelous, life-changing, world-changing things come out of situations that seem to be unmitigated sadness.

But to recognize and realize those possibilities requires being ready for them, prepared to participate in them, and able to recognize them for what they are. Israel was prepared for Jesus because of their thousand-plus years of worship and relationship with God. We must ask: how do we prepare ourselves for what new thing God may be doing in our lives?

We talk about this season of Advent being a time of waiting, and that is true. We remember Israel waiting for the Messiah, Jesus the Christ; we ourselves wait for the second coming of the Messiah. But this waiting isn't simply a passive waiting, sitting around and waiting to see what will happen. It is also a matter of preparation: it is a matter of making ourselves ready for whatever the Lord has in store because, whatever it is, the story of the Scriptures is that it is going to be different in some way than we might expect.

Toward the end of Shakespeare's Hamlet, after pages and pages of dithering, he is about to face his rival Laertes in the presence of Claudius, his uncle/stepfather, neither of whom have shown much sympathy for Hamlet's situation. Hamlet is talking to Horatio. Hamlet and Laertes are going to do a fencing match, ostensibly just for fun, but Hamlet is suspicious of what might happen (rightfully, it turns out). Horatio tells him not to do it; he should go with his instinct and slip away and Horatio will make excuses for him. Hamlet says no; now is the time to act. God's providence will provide; as he does for a sparrow, so he will for Hamlet. What will happen will happen. Then he says, "The readiness is all."

The Magnificat shows us that the readiness is all. Ready for God to break into the world; ready for God to break into our lives. Since God does this, there is never any reason for us to lose hope. Sarah and Elizabeth thought they were too old; but none of us are ever too old to participate in God's plan for the world. The prophet Isaiah thought he was too young; but none of us are ever too young to participate in God's plan. We might think we have made certain choices that foreclose any real contribution being made; but God does new things in the most unexpected ways.

Be ready. You never know what God is up to. Young or old; whatever your situation. God breaks in and brings life where life seems impossible. It happens all around us. The readiness is all.