

The Fourth Sunday in Advent
December 24, 2017

Text: Luke 1:26-38

Theme: "Filled with Good Things"

The time is close. The celebration of our Lord's birth is almost upon us. Soon the gifts will be opened. Where are those gifts stored before their opening? It could well be under the tree. Maybe it's some place else before them like shelves or in a closet. What if only those gifts could be received or given for which you had empty closet space? But then the bad news is your closet is full. Someone might be willing to give, but there is no space to receive. There would be some sad faces around that Christmas tree.

Today is the Fourth Sunday in Advent. You see all four advent candles are burning. Tonight we will light the Christ candle to celebrate the good news that the Savior has been born. This morning we have the announcement to Mary of the special gift she will carry, a child, the Child, the long awaited Child to be born and the Son given, the Son of God. Mary receives the news with a humble heart, one emptied of self-promotion ready to be filled. Mary will be filled with good things indeed.

It can be hard to receive if you are full already, like this box, no room to receive. What's the solution? It could be rather obvious.

There were lots of full folks on that day when God sent Gabriel to Mary. There was Herod, quite full of himself. At the time of our text Herod is advanced in years. He has advanced in life also. His becoming king of the Jews was no easy accomplishment. It involved much sweat, blood, and tears. In Herod's rise and keeping of power it was often the blood and tears of others that flowed from the sweat of his ambition. He was interested in keeping his box of power full. We know when the news would come of one

having been born king of the Jews this maybe at least slightly deranged old man was not exactly thrilled. His life was full of his own accomplishment and prizes. There was no room to receive the best gift to be given.

The Jewish rulers and leaders also were often all filled up with their self-importance. The chief priests certainly had their arms full. There was the intrigue, I suppose, among themselves as to who from their number would be the High Priest. And there was the business of running the temple business. Everything had to be on hand for the sacrifices. Someone had to be in charge of keeping track of the schedule of priests by their divisions. Sacrifices were daily, morning and evening, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. Animals, incense and vestments had to be on hand as needed. And maybe there was the business of determining who got to conduct their business in the temple courts, who got to set up shop to exchange coins or sell sacrificial animals.

Yes, their boxes were full. They were probably not interested in adding something else. They had no great need or desire for a Coming One. That could prove to be upsetting.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were looking for a coming one or ones. There was expectation of the return of Elijah, or The Prophet, and finally the Christ, this Son of David. And when the coming ones arrived surely they would fit into the space and place they had for them as determined by their understanding. They were not eager for one to come and challenge their interpretation of the law and the prophets through the tradition of the fathers. They had this down, or at least very refined. They had been at it for around a 100 years by this time. No, if they were to receive anything in their teaching basket or box, it would have to be the right shape and inserted in the proper slot.

Their baskets were about to be very upset. The arrival of the coming one was close at hand. Just a little earlier here in Luke 1 the father of John the Baptist, received the exciting news of the imminent arrival of John. Zechariah was a faithful servant of the Lord. He and his wife, Elizabeth, had been around for a while. While old Herod was infamous for his cruelty, Zechariah and Elizabeth are described as “righteous before God” (Luke 1:6). Yet the announcement for Gabriel catches Zachariah off guard. Gabriel announces, “Your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth were bear you a son, and you shall call his name John” (vs 13) Zechariah response, “How shall I know this? I am an old man and my wife is advanced in years” (1:18) This didn’t fit with the way he knew things worked. His understanding box was full. It was almost like “give me a sign” so I will know. He was about to get one, one that he would not particularly enjoy.

God had the greatest gift to give and many were just too full to receive. This can still be a problem. Folks can be full of the good things of life, material things. We can full of the knowledge of the good life as to how we think it out to be, one that includes a big load of me. We can be too full of our own visions of what life out to be so as to miss out on the life that God longs to give.

On the other hand we may know empty very well. We’re almost at the end of 2017, maybe it’s been a hard or emptying year in many ways. We started the year pretty full, pretty confident, but then there were disappointments. There was sickness, unfaithfulness, moving away of loved ones, or even the loss of loved ones in death. It was as though the whole bottom just dropped out and we were left drained, even stunned.

God does sustain and refill. The gift to Mary is a gift to all of us. It would appear that Mary had been filled with good teaching and example in her young life. You would have been taught about the promised one. It would seem also she was taught about

humility and service. Her primary teachers would have been her parents. She also would learn from the reading of and the application of the law and the prophets in synagogue. There she would learn of the history and hope of Israel. She would see the history of rebelling, of Israel's being given into the hands of her enemies. But she would also learn of God's mercy and promises. She would have been familiar with the words we read from 2 Samuel today, God's words to David through Nathan. "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:16). God continued to care for His people. Down through the ages he would lift up the humble and bring to naught the proud.

As Mary had been raised she probably did not have thoughts of greatness for herself. She would have visions of marriage and a family. She would look forward to the fullness of joy of that family living as God's people. It looked like it was all about to happen in Nazareth as she was betrothed to Joseph. He was of the house of David. Maybe Mary looked upon him as her prince, but she had no hopes of living a royal life.

Her basket of dreams, modest as it may have been, was about to be overturned. She has an unexpected visitor, a frightful encounter. The word to her is "greetings," but it probably left Mary wanting to hide. The message the angel has for her is astounding. She, Mary from little Nazareth, was to give birth to the long expected Son of David. She asks, "How will this be?" It was not a challenge to the truthfulness of the words as it appeared to be from Zachariah, no it was really a "how," what is the manner? 'How will it happen since I am a virgin?' Was the angel speaking of a future child to be born to her and Joseph, such a male child would be a son of David. The answer she receives is no, it won't be like that. It will be like this: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of

God” (vs 35). Mary responds with words of faith and humility. “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” (vs 38)

The time had come, fully come for God to send forth His Son born of woman, born under law to redeem those under law. The Coming Son of David would arrive. The One who was in very nature God emptied Himself by taking on the form of a servant. God came to live among us while not putting his divinity fully on display. He laid the full use of that divinity aside to walk and live as a man. Yes, there were signs and wonders from him and teaching with authority. They were signs and wonders and teaching that did not fit well in the baskets of the authorities who were full of themselves.

His mission was to do the will of the Father and do it He did. He became obedient to death, even death on a cross. The child whose conception is announced to Mary would enter Jerusalem one day not to take His seat on the throne of David as was expected by many, but to be lifted up on a cross as the sure and full sacrifice for the sins of all including Herod, the chief priests, the Pharisees, Zachariah, the shepherds, the wise men, Joseph, Mary and all of us. Only those emptied by repentance are already to receive the forgiveness procured. He has been raised up to life and has ascended to the right hand of the Father. He is reigning and one day returning.

He is ready to fill those who are empty. In the word of His law we are emptied of our delusional thoughts of our own lordship. We see there was no holy birth for us. We were born, even conceived sinners. The Gospel puts before us the redemption that is ours in Christ Jesus. In Jesus we are reborn through the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. It happens through those baptismal waters. If you have not experienced that rebirth of the water and the Spirit I would be glad to visit with you about that very thing.

Maybe come today feeling emptied, drained. We face a basketful of troubles and we are confronted with a box full of temptations. It may be hard to go on at all. We remember Mary's words sung in joy, "For he has looked on the humble estate of His servant. For behold from now on all generations will call me blessed." (Luke 1:48) Her kinswoman, Elizabeth, had just said to her, "Blessed are you among woman, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me" (1:41, 42)? God does fill with good things. Mary would be filled with the best, this holy One, the Son of God. It is good for us for this is the promised seed of the woman that would crush the head of the evil one.

God has plenty of good to give us, more than what the old nature would hold on to. The old sinful nature does have delusions of godhood, runs after that which satisfies for the moment, would build its own little kingdom. With this pursuit comes disappointment, frustration, maybe even despair. The new nature is born of the Gospel. Here is the joy of our salvation, the joy of being an heir of life eternal with God. Here is the peace that surpasses all understanding as we know our life is in God's hands. Here is peace, joy, and hope.

God fills us with these. We may feel pretty empty even this time of year, and for some especially this time of the year. There could be loss that leaves us beyond empty. We look to our Lord. In Him we do have forgiveness, life, peace, and hope. Yes there may be tears here below and may be plenty, but in the Lord joy will return, return in His time. He does fill the hunger with good things. He does fill the mourning with comfort. Blessed are those who wait for Him. For Jesus' sake. Amen