

Worship Service for December 19th: 4th Sunday of Advent - Love

- **Old Testament:** Micah 5:2-5a
- **New Testament:** Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)
- **Psalms:** Psalm 80:1-7

Announcements:

- **Friday December 24th:** Christmas Eve Service of Hope (Blue Christmas Eve)
Time: St. George's PC – 5pm; St. David's PC – 6.30pm.

Sermon Title: Blessed is the One Who Believes. Do You Believe?

For a few weeks we have been talking about John the Baptist and Jesus and today we meet their mothers. John's mum we are told is well advanced in age and pregnant with the forerunner and herald of the Saviour and Messiah who is to come. Mary her cousin is a young virgin who experiences conception through the help of the Holy Spirit.

This passage is a passage about faith. Here is Elizabeth, a woman well advanced in age becoming pregnant and for her this was already such a great blessing. Then Mary visits her pregnant with the Saviour and Messiah of the world and she realizes that God has brought to her and to the world an even greater blessing in the person of Jesus Christ. And as she celebrates Mary, she says something also very important "blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Do you believe the Word of God? When we read the gospels and the ministry of Jesus, we see miracles that happen that cause us to wonder – did this really happen? Did Jesus bring back the dead to life, did he really heal the sick, did he actually feed five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish. I know of Christians who don't believe in the resurrection and those who have tried to explain away the miracles in the Bible because of unbelief. Do we believe the promises in the Bible and that those promises are for us too?

Blessed is she who believes. Jesus uttered similar words to Thomas who had not believed in Jesus' resurrection when Jesus appeared to the other disciples in his absence. When Jesus appeared to Thomas and showed him his hands and his sides, Thomas declared, "my Lord and my God." And Jesus responded, you believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

The Word of God is truth and it was written by people who were inspired by the Holy Spirit. One of the most powerful miracles that happened in the Bible are the conception of Jesus, his death and resurrection. How could a virgin be with child without knowing a man? How could Jesus be resurrected without anyone praying for him?

The words of Elizabeth were not only true for her or for Mary but for anyone who dares to believe in God, to stand firm in His promises by faith, without relenting, while waiting for the fulfilment of God's word. Remember Jesus said to Thomas that we had blessed are those who believe without seeing.

That is what faith is all about – it is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. It is believing in the God's promises even before we see them coming to pass in our lives. It is believing in Jesus Christ our Lord, Saviour and Messiah. Faith is your conviction, the assurance and the depth of persuasion that you have about God and the integrity of His Word backed up by your action of obedience to prove that you believe.

Take Mary for example. Here she was rejoicing in God for His promise to her. She was going to have a baby out of wedlock in a culture where this was taboo. Joseph was even planning to leave her. It wasn't going to be an easy and joyful ride for Mary. I'm sure there were great persecutions that she faced even though Joseph was advised by the angel to marry her. I'm sure she was still despised by her society. Yet in spite of all that, she rejoiced in God and worshipped Him for the glory that was to come. Till today we are still celebrating her.

As easy as it might sound, trust me when I tell you that it didn't come easy for Mary. She faced persecutions to the level of Herod the king who wanted to kill her child and they had to run away and give birth in adverse conditions. It wasn't easy for Mary but it was worth it.

The past couple of years have been difficult for everyone in different ways. We have gone through all kinds of challenges and going through different challenges when there are so many restrictions in the world is not an easy thing.

And a lot of times when you are in pain you feel like you are all alone, like you are by yourself and that nobody has been through the things you have been through.

And you feel like the challenges that you are experiencing are insurmountable, too great to overcome.

I want to remind you today that there is a man named Jesus; a prophet, king and priest. A High Priest who is very intimately acquainted with our sufferings. He was despised and rejected by men and on the cross he became our pain, he became our weakness, he became our bondage. He took all of these things upon himself so that you didn't have to carry it. He took whatever you are going through at this moment upon himself and died with it in his body. And he was raised up free and victorious and that was a promise to you that if you hang in there, I will raise you up too.

Micah tells us that Jesus *“shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.”*

In the eighteenth century, there was a great Anglican evangelist in the UK called George Whitefield. He traveled to the US to spread the gospel and was involved in a movement called “the Great Awakening.” He once visited a wealthy family and discovered that they didn't believe God. Before leaving their house, he took a diamond ring and scratched on the windowpane of his room, “one thing thou lackest!” These words pierced the hearts of this family who came to realize that even with their money, beauty, mansions and even their outward religious observance, they lacked faith in God. They were without Jesus.

We all need faith to receive God's promises. Hebrews 11:6 says without faith it is impossible to please God. God can keep His promises only if we as individuals and a congregation can believe by faith. We can be transformed and we can reach out to others with the powerful message of God's love through Christ Jesus our Lord.

It's easy for us to bail out in the face of challenges, especially when we have gone through a pandemic for two years. It's easy to feel like God is no more at work and therefore we become cold in our work with God. We don't devote ourselves to God's service as we used to because we have lost faith in God and in humanity or because of challenges and persecutions. It is safe for us to think that because we are not Elizabeth or Mary, or the minister, or an elder or any other leader in the church then God is not calling us.

We might not be any of those people, but let us know that Jesus is always at work to do a new thing in our midst through us if we would let him. We might just be the person that God will use to fulfil His purpose in the life of someone. It is the responsibility of every Christian to participate in bringing God's kingdom into our worlds.

My prayer is that you would look to Jesus today, look to him when you are in pain and dare to believe and trust that he is going to help you come through your pain. Believe his Word which says that he will never leave you nor forsake you. Go to his Word and read and meditate on it and pray those scriptures into your life and into your situation. Believe God's Word because He is not a man to lie, neither is He a human to change His mind.

It is time for you to believe that God can use even you to fulfil His kingdom assignment on the earth. It is time for you to believe that God is calling you, inspiring you, encouraging you and making a way for you where there seems to be no way. Believe that God touches hearts, opens minds and transforms lives and that He still desires righteousness, faithfulness and justice on the earth. Believe because "blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Believe that there is going to be a fulfillment of what has been spoken by the Lord. In the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayer

Father we thank You for your Word to us today. We thank You for your love for us and for your son Jesus Christ who came and died on the cross for our sins. We thank you for the power of the cross and its ability to deliver us from every pain. Thank you, Jesus, for the power of what you became on the cross, everything broken with humanity. You broke what was broken so that we might be made whole and well. We confess that we have not always believed and therefore have not always experiencing the blessings that come to those who believe. Help our unbelief dear Father and bless us and heal our pain and sufferings. Fill us Lord with the spirit of unwavering faith that no matter what happens, we will not be afraid but continue to trust and hold fast to your promises.

God of Zechariah and Elizabeth and John, God of Mary and Joseph and Our Lord Jesus Christ, Throughout all generations you have been faithful to us. You have

given new life to the world through sons and daughters, through grandchildren and great grandchildren, who took up the promises you made to their fathers and mothers and followed your way in the world. In this time and in the time to come, raise up a new generation who will live out the new life you promise in Christ Jesus, with us and with your church in every neighbourhood and nation. God of Our Hearts and Our Hopes, **May your new possibilities be born in us this day.**

Thank you, O God, for all the faithful saints we have known in our lives. Their trust in you gives us hope whenever our own faith wavers. May we be faithful in this generation as others have been before us, so that our ministry and mission in Jesus' name will be renewed, engaging the world in refreshing, respectful ways.

We pray today for those struggling with loss and discouragement this season: for those who have lost someone dear; for those who cannot find meaningful work; and all for whom challenge and change make the future uncertain. Embrace them with your compassion and strength to persevere.

We pray for those for whom sickness and death obscure your promise of health and salvation; and for those who have given up on themselves and on the goodness of others. We remember those who face conflict in their homes or their homelands, who wonder or fear what tomorrow may bring. We pray for the creation that has suffered from fire, storm and earthquake this year, and for the lives disrupted by drought and despair. Embrace all who suffer with your comfort and courage.

God of Life and Love, receive our gifts this day as tokens of our love for you and signs of our willingness to share that love in the world around us. Bless our lives as well as our gifts, so that we may be a blessing to others.

God of All Life and Each Life, As a challenging year comes to a close, and a new year beckons, come to us and be with us once more as we celebrate Christ's birth. With the tenderness of your Spirit, lighten our burdens, and show us new possibilities for our own lives and for the ministries we take up in Jesus' name, for we find confidence in the prayer he taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us

from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Benediction

May you never put your faith in worldly status, and never underestimate your heavenly importance. Let your trust in the coming of Christ soar within you like wings of hope, peace, joy and love. Go out into the world and serve one another as God-bearers. And may the grace, mercy and peace, from God our Creator and Father, through Jesus our Saviour, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit our Nurturer, be with you this day and evermore. Amen.