

Advent 4

By God's Grace may I speak in the name of the God who was and is and is to come. Amen.

The encounter of two women. Both pregnant, in a rather unexpected way. One is pregnant, although she was considered infertile and is past child-bearing age. The other is pregnant despite being a virgin and not yet married, in a time and place where an unmarried woman faced the possibility of getting stoned to death, for being in such a situation.

But despite all that, despite all the improbabilities, the unexpectedness and weirdness of it all, God is at work here. God is at work in the lives of Elizabeth, of Mary, their unborn children and in the lives of all those who encounter them. God is present, God is here, God is at work. And it might not be in the ways Elizabeth, Mary or us here would have chosen. It's all rather precarious, risky and a bit mind boggling. What if something goes wrong? Was this really the best plan God could come up with? Pregnancy and birth for a woman of Elizabeth's age carried significant risks. Medicine was much more limited than today and there was a very real chance that bringing her baby into the world, would cost her life. Mary faced the very real possibility of stoning, of her fiancé Josef abandoning her to the outcast existence of an unmarried mother in her time.

Both these women have plenty of reasons to feel scared and anxious. And I am sure both also had such moments during the months of their pregnancies. But at the moment of this encounter, there is joy, excitement and anticipation. They both are confident that God is at work

within the precariousness of their unexpected pregnancies and they believe and trust, that somehow, God is at work in all of this messiness.

We are already on the fourth Sunday of Advent, with Christmas just around the corner. I don't know what your hopes and expectations for Christmas are, or what your past experiences of Christmas were like. But I know that there is often a great deal of pressure for Christmas to be perfect, whatever our definition of a perfect Christmas may be. It can be exhausting and usually leads to at least some disappointment. It's certainly a lot of pressure.

Yet here we hear the story of these two women, who rejoice, despite the precarious situation they are in. They rejoice, because they are confident that God somehow is at work in the messiness of it all. Neither of their pregnancies is picture perfect, but in both of their pregnancies God is at work.

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, not all things may be picture perfect. I am sure there will be the odd thing in our upcoming Christmas Services, that will not be quite perfect and in the stress of it all there might also be an encounter or two that could do with a bit more kindness. There might be some tensions or disappointments as we celebrate Christmas in our homes. Christmas might end up not being picture perfect this year.

And if you encounter such small or great disappointments this Christmas, I would encourage you to remember Mary and Elizabeth, rejoicing despite the precarious situations of their pregnancies, confident that God is somehow at work in the messiness of it all. My hope and prayer for us all is that we have a very blessed Christmas. One that isn't picture perfect, but one we can find joy in as Elizabeth and Mary did, confident that God is present with us and at work in the messiness of our lives. Amen.