

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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24 December 2006

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Micah 5:2-5a

Luke 1:39-55

Hush

Sssh.

Can you hear it?

An expectant silence,
a hushed anticipation,
as if the very galaxy
is holding its breath/

There are truths
even the stars know,
like darkness,
like loneliness,
and how the night
can be a living thing.

And how once, long ago,
the night waited in wonder
along with the darkness
and the loneliness,
for the sound of a baby's cry,

for the miraculous
to come down
to the earth mundane. (Lucinda Hynett)

It's fairly hard to imagine the sense of expectancy those two women must have had as they spent those three months together. Sure, the text is much more about the moment when they greeted one another, when Elizabeth proclaimed the blessed truth about Mary and the child she was carrying, and even John turned a somersault from inside Elizabeth's womb as a way of saying hi to his cousin. But look beyond that moment to some of the others that had to have happened in the course of the three months they spent together. Rocking on the porch, knitting their baby blankets, stitching the layettes they would need, Mary helping Elizabeth and John put the finishing touches on their nursery, even as she dreamed of what she would do to fix up that back room at Joseph's house. What do you suppose they thought about, talked about, saw when they looked at each other? One woman way too old to be having a baby. She'd made her peace with the reality that she'd never give birth to her own child years ago, and now, here she was, rubbing

her back, straining to get up out of chairs, struggling to find a position, any position where she was comfortable. And the other, well, the other just shouldn't have been pregnant. Not only was she too young, but it wasn't even possible that she was pregnant. She'd much rather IM her friends with chatter about her wedding day than be learning health tips on caring for a baby. Every time they looked at each other they shook their heads in amazement – sometimes they laughed, sometimes they cried. But no matter how else they looked at it, they both knew something bigger than they was happening here. For some reason neither of them could fathom, they'd been tapped by God, called into service to play a role they couldn't begin to comprehend. So as they sat together out on the front porch of that small house in the back hills of Judea, they must have wondered what it all meant, and what was about to happen, and why they were the ones who had been chosen. No, others weren't likely to understand. The best Mary could hope for was sneers and jeers – if she wasn't careful, this pregnancy could cost her her life. And yet, what choice had she had? When God showed up and said she'd been chosen for the impossible and the unprecedented, she didn't know how to do anything but say yes. So here they both were, waiting, wondering, trying to make sense of it all, doing their best to get ready. New life was on the way, and all they could do was put one foot in front of the other, do what they knew how to do, and stay open for some further sign from God as to precisely what was unfolding, some further word of instruction.

I for one have never been pregnant. Many of you have, but as far as I know, not too many of those pregnancies were miraculous; then again, maybe they're all miraculous, but not many of them were shocking or unexplainable. Whether we've borne children or not, I wonder if most of us, male and female, can't connect in some sense with that notion of waiting, expecting, getting ready for the miracle of new life to enter the scene. Maybe in the form of a baby, but it just as likely could have been something else. A new sense of purpose and direction in life. A fresh start in a new job or a new community or a new house. A slate wiped clean, a burden thrown off, an addiction confessed and put in its place. A seed of an idea, a longing, a possibility planted deep so that it nudges and compels and insists, all the while growing toward life and reality. A dream moves from unspoken vision to deep seated longing to the focus and purpose of life. A dream of peace. A dream of hope. A dream of justice. A dream of being in the world and caring for the world in ways never yet experienced or embraced. A dream that children will no longer go to bed hungry, that the rich won't have so much to protect and preserve that they forget how to dance and play, and the empty won't have so little that they barely make it through the day at all. A dream that the outcast and downcast will be lifted up and embraced, while the high and mighty are brought down off their high horses and lowered to the level of looking eye to eye with those they've been overlooking, standing toe to toe with those they've been standing on.

Those are precisely the sorts of dreams that God is planting all the time, and as we prepare to once again celebrate the birth of Jesus into Mary's and Joseph's and all of our lives, I hope we'll also take time to wonder what new life God is bringing to birth through us. Or would like to bring to birth if we were open to it. It may make sense, it may not. It may be welcomed and embraced by the world, it may be scoffed at, criticized, maybe even crucified. But if it's from God, it's a life we're called to embrace and welcome and celebrate.

Mary and Elizabeth were called to birth babies and present them to God's people. What new life is God asking you to bear into the world? Or me? Or us together? What miracle of new life does God have in store for us this Christmas?