

12/14/14 -- Advent 3B - "The Possibilities of God's Promises" - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©  
Scripture: Is 61:1-4, 8-11; Luke 1:47-55; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 15-28

Today, we witness Mother Mary as she visits with Elizabeth, who is the mother of John the Baptist. Mary tells Elizabeth about her new future and what God has done with and for her. She is in an interesting situation here - young and pregnant, and at least in Luke's Gospel, still unmarried. In Mother Mary's day and age, this is dangerous and potentially deadly, so it is likely Mary has sought refuge with a relative - Elizabeth. Regardless of all the cultural issues, Mary receives her situation with exultation and rejoicing. She sees forward into a life of new possibilities and knows one thing and one thing only. Mother Mary knows she has been chosen and blessed by God. She knows she is a direct and close participant in the Great Reversals that God creates in his people's lives. Remember Psalm 126?

*"Restore our fortunes, O Lord,  
like streams in the Negeb!  
Those who sow in tears  
shall reap with shouts of joy!  
He who goes out weeping,  
bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy,  
bringing his sheaves with him."* (Psalm 126:4-6)

God brings about new possibilities in the lives of those whom the Lord has claimed as his own. God does this in spite of the past more often than because of it. Isaiah wrote his prophecy that we read today in a time when the Israelites barely have a memory of Jerusalem or even the practices which defined them as the chosen people of God, when they were still under their captivity and enslavement in Babylon. And yet like a bride and bridegroom facing a brand new future together, or a new seed in a newly tilled field God creates new possibilities for them. This is in spite of the past. The chosen people of God are "*oaks of righteousness, the planting of Yahweh, to show His glory*" (Is 61:3)

I do not mean to imply that the past is always bad, or that we should do new things always in opposition to what has been done in the past. What I think Advent pushes us towards, however, is what we spoke of the first week of Advent - do we expect new things from God, or do we expect to do things the way we, from our human point of view, have always done them? That week, we spoke of being expectant of God's presence as a way of standing strong in the face of the unknown, of being willing to look into the future really not knowing what God will bring to us. It means, as we look at this week, that the past, our past, does not determine our future - spiritually or otherwise.

Mary visits Elizabeth excited about her future, about the new possibilities God has in store for her and especially for her son, God's Son. "*Let it be unto me, according to your word*", she says in response to Angel Gabriel's announcement to her. And then Mother Mary steps into her new life, her new future, knowing only that she is blessed by God, a handmaiden of the Lord. She empties herself of who she was for the sake of who she is becoming in the eyes of God.

In the Christian tradition, this is called "self-emptying". Our model for 'self-emptying' is Jesus Christ, of whom Philippians 2 says,

*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.*  
(Philippians 2:5-7)

The act of self-emptying means we, as Paul says, take on a God-oriented point of view, rather than a human point of view. This self-emptying tradition goes by the name of the Via Negativa, the path of negation; as opposed to the Via Positiva, the path of assertion or positive knowing. It is a way of speaking about either what we don't know about God or about what we do know about God.

The Via Negativa also applies to us as well. It is a way of approaching our spiritual lives, a way of prayer and understanding which requires a rigorous attention to the interior self. It is a path of discernment which says to all things not of God, not spiritual, "I am not this".

This is what John the Baptist is doing today with the Pharisees who seek to question him. The Pharisees have built an entire system around what they know God to be. They have only been traveling down the Via Positiva.

John the Baptist sets himself to be exactly the opposite, a journeyman on the Via Negativa. John the Baptist is asked by the Pharisees, "Who are you?" and he answers, "I am **not** the Christ". He tells them he is not the person they want them to be. Then they ask, "Who then? Are you Elijah?" John answers in fewer words, saying, "I am **not**". He tells them he is not the person he should have been. And then the Pharisees ask, "Are you the Prophet (Moses)?", and John answers with a simple negation. "**No**" (Jn 1:19-22). He tells them he is not an example of the distant past. He denies the future, the present and the past in his exchange. In doing so, John the Baptist also lets go of all the expectations and possibilities others want of him, and instead walks, like Mother Mary, into an unknown future of possibilities.

John provides a model for each of us. Notice the only positive thing John the Baptist says about himself is that he is "*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness...*" (Jn 1:23). Like Isaiah and like Mary, John knows only that he is loved and chosen by God. He lets go of everything else - who people want him to become, who he is and who he was in the eyes of others.

Can we, like Isaiah, Mother Mary and John the Baptist, also walk along the Via Negativa? It is a difficult road, because each path is untraveled, unlike the Via Positiva. The value of the Via Positiva is that one can build upon those who have walked that road before. We know what they knew and can come to know things based on that past. We know the destinations and the coordinates of each town and perhaps even the construction zones. The Via Positiva is like having your Google Maps or GPS always on.

The Via Negativa, though, is like the beginning of Dante's Inferno, the beginning of his journey to knowledge of God. This is where that journey for Dante begins:

*Midway upon the journey of our life  
I found myself within a forest dark,  
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.*  
(Canto 1, *The Inferno* by Dante Alighieri)

It is a journey into an unknown place with an unknown destination. The paths are not clear. Each person much journey on the Via Negativa in their own way. Its spiritual value lies in the wilful engagement of the unknown, just as Advent calls us to do.

Possibilities for self and our future can only really be welcomed when we walk this path with Isaiah, Mary and John.

The Via Negativa means your personal past - your lineage, your traditions from family and personal past, all the acts which you have judged and have been judged for - is emptied. "I am not my past. I am not who you thought I was."

The Via Negativa means your possessions - your attachment to things in your home, to your personal stuff, your bank account - are ejected and emptied, if not literally then figuratively. Or to put it another way, imagine losing all your stuff tomorrow. How would you feel about it? That exercise will give you a good measure of the distance down the Via Negativa you need to walk.

The Via Negativa means letting go of people - what they think of you, who you think they should be, what they have done to you, what you expect of them - so that they get to be who God truly intends them to be, and more importantly, you get to be who God wishes you to be. We learn to love others when we learn to let go of all the things with which we burden them - expectations, judgments, differences.

The Via Negativa is a path we all will have to walk in our faith life. Not knowing the future and not knowing outcomes can either be very painful, or like Mary, it can be welcomed with joy and exultation. The reason John the Baptist can be confident in the face of the Pharisees, the reason Mary can welcome her situation with joy and exultation and the reason Isaiah can say to the people of Israel that "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God" (Is 61:10a) is because each of them know only one thing. They each know they are chosen and blessed by God.

So it is not that the Via Negativa is all about rejecting everything; it is simply that in order to stand with John the Baptist and exult with Mary and prophesy with Isaiah we only know one thing, and nothing else. Everything else is actually *not* who we are at all.

We gather under the Cross each Sunday and in doing so, we proclaim, merely by our presence, that Jesus Christ has chosen us to be a part of the great and blessed family of God. We share that with one another now, with those who have gone before us and those who will follow us. But each of us must come to know one thing in our own way. It means we do not know the future God has in store for us.

1 Thessalonians gives us the pattern for our spiritual approach to the Via Negativa: *we rejoice always* that God has called us and chosen us in Christ; *we pray constantly* that we can always let go of our past, our possessions and people by the power of the Holy Spirit, who calls us to love in the way we have been loved by Christ; *we give thanks in everything* - that which we have lost, that which has been in our past, that which has been done to us and what we have done, but especially the new possibilities God has chosen for us.

We rejoice, pray and give thanks because we know only one thing - that we are chosen and blessed by God through the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amen.