

Proclaiming God
by Rev. Joe Connolly

“And Mary said, / ‘My soul proclaims / Your greatness, O God, / and my spirit rejoices in You, my Savior, / for You have looked with favor / on Your lowly servant.’” — Luke 1:46-48.

You have probably more than once heard me say I was a member of an Episcopal Church— All Angels Church— on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. When I left New York to go to Maine the membership there numbered about 450 souls.

That’s a goodly sized number but once you consider the population of Manhattan, a limited number. Now, when a church is that size, there is a need to find methods to encourage people to be engaged in multiple ways beyond what might be loosely called the institutional church.

Hence, members of the laity at one point began to form small groups who met once a week outside the Sunday service. They called these small groups house churches. They called them house churches even though, this being Manhattan, they lived in apartments.

What did they do when then met? They met for prayer, for the study of Scripture, for discussion, for camaraderie and to talk about ways to engage in doing the work of God. Small groups of many stripes are, in fact, the secret of being an effective large church. You see, a Sunday service is where all the small groups come together as one.

But by its nature, a Sunday Service is a difficult place to have fully developed prayer, Scripture study, discussion, camaraderie and consider the work God calls us to do. Often a Sunday service is a place where not everyone knows everyone. Prayer, Scripture study, discussion, camaraderie and doing the work of God can more readily happen in that small, intimate context of each separate group once members get to know one another.

Here’s the paradox: what large churches really do to be effective is to copy what small churches do by the nature of their being small. You see, prayer, Scripture study, discussion, camaraderie and doing the work of God is best done in small group settings, with people you know well and who know you well. That work is not even remotely possible in the context of a Sunday worship.

This bottom line is simple: what do large churches do to maintain themselves? They act like small churches. They form small groups.

Now, when those small groups started to form at All Angels, a friend of mine invited me to a group. I was, frankly, a little hesitant since I had a limited amount of time in the course of my week. Thinking I didn’t know what that was like he said, “You should just try it to see what it’s like.”

“I know what it’s like,” said I. “My family of origin *was* a house church.” I continued, “My mother had been in a convent but dropped out, met my father and got married. My father taught at a Jesuit school.”

“Every Friday night after dinner the family gathered at the dinning room table, prayed, read Scripture, had discussion and talked about what we were doing. And, as the three children got old enough to deal with advanced topics, that discussion ranged from the writings of Augustine

to the existentialism of Jesuit theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.” I probably sounded a little defensive when I then said, “So do not tell me I am unfamiliar with house church. I know it better than most.” (Slight pause.)

These words are in Luke: “And Mary said, / ‘My soul proclaims / Your greatness, O God, / and my spirit rejoices in You, my Savior, / for You have looked with favor / on Your lowly servant.’” (Slight pause.)

Earlier, at the start of the service, I explained there are three sets of lectionary readings assigned for the Feast of the Incarnation, Christmas. [1] These sets of three readings are for the three different services on Christmas and they do not change year to year. The same reading is always assigned year after year after year.

The Second Chapter of Luke— some might identify this as the Charlie Brown Christmas reading— is always the Christmas Eve reading. You know those words. “...there were shepherds in that region, living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night,” etc., etc., etc.

But this is a given: the two readings we heard from the First Chapter of Luke are not just a part of the story of the birth of the Messiah but are as pivotal— *are as pivotal*— as the shepherds and the angels. If you consider only the Charlie Brown reading, what Luke is trying to convey about the birth of the Messiah becomes quite limited.

In fact, the full story Luke tells about the birth starts at the Fifth Verse of the First Chapter. (Quote:) “In the days of the ruler Herod, there was a priest named Zechariah...” These words initiate the story of the birth of the Messiah and are about the birth of John, a relative of Jesus, later identified as the Baptizer.

Further, the story of the birth of the Messiah does not end until the Fortieth Verse of the Second Chapter with the circumcision of Jesus at the Temple in Jerusalem. Why is that important?

Circumcision fulfills the ritual requirements set out in the *Torah*. And please note: this ritual is done not in Nazareth nor in Bethlehem. This is done at the Temple in Jerusalem.

The point I’m making is simple. The story about birth of the Messiah is not just the story about the shepherds, angels, a stable, a manger. I would also maintain the story of the birth of the Messiah cannot be well understood unless you know and unless read (to quote the late Paul Harvey) the rest of the story.

So, that leaves the obvious question: what is the story of the birth of the Jesus in Luke about? Yes, you do need to know and read the whole story but I also think the words we hear Mary say are a significant piece of it.

It is absolutely clear these words proclaim a certainty about the real presence of God. To use a more traditional term, these words proclaim the in-breaking of God.

And what Mary says reiterates and reenforces what Luke says elsewhere. To note just two points Luke makes— first, the birth of the Messiah is proclaimed and is to be proclaimed *to* those who are poor, powerless. Second, we are called on to do what Mary says she is doing. We are called on to proclaim God is real, God is present, God is with us, God walks with us.

Given everything in Luke's rendition of the birth of the Messiah, that is exactly what is being addressed through the story— throughout the story of the birth— especially when the story is taken as a whole. God is real, God is present, God is with us, God walks with us. (Slight pause.)

That brings me back to the aforementioned small groups. Worship is worship. Worship is a significant, necessary, important, wonderful way to support our faith. Worship is something we are called to do by God. But there are other needs.

Anselm of Canterbury, philosopher, theologian of the 11th Century agreed. This Benedictine monk said yes, we need to have faith but our faith must seek understanding. I think too often we make the understanding aspect of faith unimportant.

And that is where small groups come into play. As I said earlier— prayer, Scripture study, discussion, camaraderie and doing the work God calls us to do— can more readily happen in the smaller, intimate context of each individual group once members get to know one another. (Slight pause.)

Last week at the Children's Time by using a mirror and a flashlight Linda and Jen demonstrated that we are called on to reflect who God is in our lives, the goodness of God. And reflecting the goodness of God is something we learn from others.

Any good teacher will tell you the real way people learn deeply is not from a book. The real way people learn is through interaction with one another. (Slight pause.)

As these things go we are a small church in a rural area with a small population. And yes, we gather for worship on a Sunday and our small groups get together also.

And we do have small groups who gather for all kinds of reasons. To name a few, these range from the Prayer Shawl Group to the Adult Study groups to the Christian Education group to the Choir to our standing committees. And, in a very short time, we shall add a Transition Committee to that roster.

And yes, in these groups we learn from each other. Further, I think if these groups did not exist or people stopped attending them we would cease to be a church. But they do exist and we are a church.

How? Why? I think in these groups what we really learn is our work, the work to which God call us, is to proclaim, to reflect the goodness of God, as Mary did. And we deeply learn to reflect the goodness of God from each other. Amen.

12/24/2017 — Note: the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, New York

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: "A reminder: we do not celebrate the birthday of Christ. That would simply be remembering something that happened long ago. We celebrate the amazing reality of the incarnation, God entering our world, this in-breaking of God into the world. The Christian belief is because of this in-breaking nothing has been the same since. Put differently, what happened is not as important as why it matters. It matters because Christ is with us."

BENEDICTION: Let us go in hope and in joy and in peace, for we find love in the One who has made covenant with us. And, indeed, God reigns. And may the face of God shine upon us; may the peace of Christ rule among us; may the fire of the Spirit burn within us this day and forevermore. Amen.

[1]

This is what was said at the start of the service.

Once a celebration of the Incarnation made its way on to the church calendar, which was not until well into the Fourth Century of the Common Era, and throughout most of church history thereafter right until the 1970s, services observing the Feast known as Christmas were not celebrated until midnight. Even today the lectionary still lists three readings for Christmas. The first set of those readings was and is intended for use at the so called Christmas Eve service, a service which used to be held at Midnight of the 25th. The second set was and is intended for use at the service celebrated with a service held at dawn on the 25th. The third set was and is intended for use at the service celebrated around mid-day on the 25th. Unlike what we see in modern times, this mid-day Christmas Day service was the most solemn of all the services, therefore, the most important one. Interestingly, the assigned Gospel reading for that mid-day solemn service is the beginning of the First Chapter of John— “In the Beginning was the Word.” This is a reading not about the birth of Jesus but about the reality of the eternal God Who is present to us. And, rumor to the contrary, an eternal God Who is present to us addresses the real meaning of Christmas.