

“Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine,
that we may be saved.” AMEN!

We move today and recognize a change
in our Advent texts.

From the early weeks of repentance and
preparation lessons in Advent,

today we find the message changes.

It is noticeable also that our weather has changed,
the seasons have changed, and
we might notice that God is doing
some changes in our lives, too.

God did something in the lives of
these two women,
Elizabeth and Mary, and

everything changed for them.

Elizabeth was a married woman,
past the age of being able to conceive of a child
and Mary was a young girl
who hadn't had sexual relations. (Pause)

It reminds me of a story told by a pastor

about a little girl who decided to make
her own Christmas cards to mail to her friends.

Her parents helped her to gather the art supplies
and set her down to utilize her creative abilities
and she began to create her own
Christmas cards.

When she completed her first one her parents
looked at the drawing that graced the cover
of the card and were puzzled.

They looked at each other and then
looked at artwork again.

Not wanting to say the wrong thing
and discourage the child,

mom asked the girl to explain what she'd drawn.

The girl pointed to the illustration in the top corner
and said, "That's the angle Gabriel."

"Ah, yes, I see that!" Mom said.

Then they asked the daughter about
the larger character in the center of the card.

They'd supposed it was Mary, but
Mary did not have the customary smile or
calm/meditative look, and her leg

was drawn in an unusual way.

“Tell me about this person,” they asked.

“Oh, yeah, that’s Mary. She is not happy and is stomping her foot.”

“But, why?” They wondered.

“She wanted to have a girl,” the child said. :-)

God did something in the lives of
Mary and Elizabeth, that’s true,
but sometimes I wonder if it was *really*
what they wanted. (Pause)

Tis’ the season to get what we want, isn’t it?

We’ve made our lists, and notified the people
around us of the things we want, and
expect to get, on Wednesday morning and
then feign joyful surprise.

But do we stop for a minute,
just for a moment, and ask the question,
not what it is we want, but

“What is it that we really need?” (Pause)

Elizabeth and Zechariah had always wanted a child,
but could never have one.

Now, they're at the age when most of
their peers are grandparents and then they're
told Elizabeth's pregnant.

Mary, probably wanted to have a child, too.

But not until after she'd been married to Joseph.

Being made pregnant before marriage made it
look like she'd been unfaithful and dishonest.

Being made pregnant before marriage made
it look like she didn't follow God's rules.

No one would want to marry her,
and in a culture where marriage
meant survival for women, that was deadly.

What God did in the lives of Elizabeth and Mary
changed everything for them.

You can almost hear the whispers,
"Can you believe how old she is?"

"Can you believe how young she is?"

The changes God brought to their lives also
changed everything for the people
who came after them. (Pause)

Elizabeth and Zechariah's child would grow up
to be John the baptizer.

Mary and Joseph's child would grow up to be Jesus,
the savior of the world.

These two (Mary and Elizabeth) are intertwined.

Not only as relatives, but as parents
asked to do amazing things.

It must have felt so lonely for them both,
but they come together to support each other.

At the announcement and during the following
months of pregnancy and birth it all may not
have been what the two women wanted,

but it was what they, and us, and God needed.

And so many people miss it. (Pause)

It never ceases to amaze me the way Christianity,
at times, confuses the difference
between need and want.

The wants have proved to be preferred by institutions.

They want to make people into disciples (students)
but not of Jesus.

They want to make people into disciples
of their denomination, institution, or belief system.

Here's an example.

The past few months I have been sensing
the need to begin a grief support group
here at St. Stephen.

Years ago, I used a program called GriefShare
at the congregation I served in Panama City.

It was a good program, not inexpensive, either.

It included videos of grief counselors,
psychologists, and real interviews of people
who had loved ones die.

I led two different groups in Panama City
with general success, it was quite user-friendly.

The only thing I didn't like about the videos was
that from time to time, they'd input statements
that I found inappropriate.

They'd pause at a powerful truth about grief,
and the work it takes to move through it,
and ask us,

"If you have not received Christ into your heart,
you may be facing eternal damnation.

If you want forgiveness from God and eternal life,
then bow your head and ask God to come into
your heart and become a Christian.

Ask your pastor how to do this.” (Pause)

I'd prepare the class for this before it happened
and let them know that this was not why
I was leading the class.

The invitation, on the videos, felt coercive and
manipulative, taking advantage of people's
emotions.

It made the work of the grief process a tool
to make disciples, not of Jesus, but of
a belief system.

Everything else about Grief Share was so good
that I'd work around that one thing.

Well, it all came to clarity when, last week,
I went online to order GriefShare for a group here.

I thought it a little odd when they wanted to know
our web address, but didn't think that much about it.

The next day, after I'd paid for the program,
I got this email.

“We at Church Initiative appreciate your interest in hosting GriefShare groups and the potential partnership with us ministering to those navigating the difficult journey of grief within your community.

We are guided by and produce our resources according to our deeply held religious beliefs.

While we encourage every church’s GriefShare group to be open to all individuals, our mission and organizational policy requires that every partnering

church’s doctrinal statement and ministry practices be in alignment with our ministry’s Statement of Faith.”

Now I’m thinking, “Here we go.”

Upon clicking the link to their Statement of Faith I find the first red flag.

“We believe the Bible, in its original autographs, to be only infallible, authoritative Word of God.”

So when people start talking about the infallibility of scripture or the inerrant word of God, beware!

They're wanting you to follow them, NOT Jesus.

They don't want discussion nor relationship building.

They want to tell you what to believe and what to do.

The following points were okay,
until I got to the last one.

Ah, the fine print!

Point 8 reads: We believe that human sexuality
is a gift from God (no problem there,
if they'd stopped, but the know-it-alls can't stop)

and that, it goes on to say, each person is
created male or female;
that marriage is a sacred covenant between
one biological male and one biological
female. (Pause)

(Sigh)

Somewhere along the way, their calling to
assist people in the grief process,
to grow wise through grief,

became overshadowed with
the sin of judgment and the exclusion of
those whom God created. (Pause)

I went back to the email letter and read
“While we deeply appreciate your church’s
dedication to serving and supporting those
in need.

We are asking church leadership to acknowledge
that St. Stephen is in alignment
(or will be in the future) with our
Statement of Faith.”

I took a deep breath and replied,
“Dear Pati. What a shame. Cancel my order.”
(Pause)

In the Hebrews lesson today,
twice we read the author saying

“See, God I have come to do your will.”

It’s the voice of Jesus that said this:
See, God I have come to do your will.

What is God’s will? (Wait for answers from the church....)

(Love, Mercy, Justice)

Not to segregation nor discriminate.

Mary and Elizabeth were surely targets
for people’s judgments and criticisms,
maybe even serious threats upon their lives.

But, the elder Elizabeth gave courage to
the younger Mary and the younger Mary
brought hope to the elder Elizabeth.

These affirmations led to Mary's Magnificat,
her Song of Praise, which reveals to us
what God is up to.

God is up to looking with favor on the lowly servant.

To bringing mercy to those who respect God.

To bringing down the powerful from their thrones.

Filling the hungry with good things and
sending the rich away empty.

Not one word about sexuality or gender.

Not a bit that tells us to make disciples of institutions
nor systems of belief. (Pause)

As we consider God's will in our lives.

It's interesting, and remarkable, that
the fate of salvation rested upon a
scared adolescent girl,
who quickly became a strong
woman of faith.

She was blessed, but would also stand and
see her child die an agonizing death while
hanging from a cross.

Elizabeth, because of her age, might have
been spared the agony of seeing her son
executed by Herod Antipas

because of a negligent promise to a young girl
and her selfish mother's request for his
head on a platter.

The story about them in Luke lifts
them up for us to see, and emulate.

It also reminds us that those who truly follow Jesus,
and respect God, are not offered a cake walk
through life.

Following Jesus is not something that makes
you immune to suffering.

It will not make you wealthy and selfish.

Following Jesus will not fill you with food
nor make people powerful over other people.

Our baptism not only joins us to God's glory,
but also to Jesus' suffering.

True discipleship, that is, being a student

that follows Jesus,
comes with a cost.

It's variable, for some the cost is great,
for others it will be minor,
but it's always there.

False discipleship, that is, being a student that follows
an institution or system of power,
will be scattered and sent away empty. (Pause)

That's why we do what we do here at St. Stephen.

And we do it unashamedly.

For freedom is contagious and we can
call a thing what it truly is.

As Mary sang... May it be so according to your will.

AMEN!