

Fourth Sunday of Advent 2021 C

On April 25, 1991, I baptized a child his parents named Richard David. Of the hundreds of babies baptized over the years, Richard stands out in memory because he was only 25 weeks old, very close to the edge of viability – just a tiny thing, so frail and fragile but remarkably resilient with that infant’s drive to live. Richard was baptized in the NICU, and in that very early moment of life made a member of the living Body of Christ. I ran into his dad a couple of years later who told me that Richard was then a thriving child entering the Terrible Two’s with gusto. Now, 33 years later, perhaps he has his own children and marvels at *the gift of life from God* that can be so fragile and yet so strong.

Richard was for me an example of how God reveals amazing things through smallness, weakness, powerlessness. *“And you, Bethlehem-Ephrathah, too small to be among the clans of Judah ... from you shall come forth for Me one Who is to be ruler.”* It is an obscure and unimportant village that becomes the birthplace of the world’s Redeemer. *“How does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?”* Elizabeth had remained childless into her later years, but now is drawn into God’s plan to bear the Messiah’s forerunner in her son John, and to know the presence of the Savior hidden and silent in the womb of her cousin Mary. Mary herself says, *“How can this be”* – that she was to be the Mother of God – *“since I am a virgin?”* With her, we ponder the fact that the Savior and Lord of the universe chose to appear among us in the weakest and most vulnerable way. *The weakness with which Jesus enters our human history was a foreshadowing of how He would end His life ... rejected and crucified by those He came to save.* And we still wonder ... despite the victory we profess in His Resurrection, why do sickness and disease, war and violence, the suffering of innocent children and so many others in our world, still go on as we await His return? Why does the all-powerful God choose the small, the weak, the hidden, the unexpected, to bring salvation?

Isaiah tells us that God’s ways are not our ways, His thoughts are not our thoughts. And that is our hope – that our trust in God’s mercy and grace can carry us where our understanding and human plans and reason

cannot. *Elizabeth speaks for all of us across the centuries who are blest when we believe that the Lord's word to us will be fulfilled.*

The Psalm response for today reads in part: "Lord, make us turn to you." We might envision God compelling us to follow, somehow bypassing our freedom. But that's not the way of God. Instead, he sends a baby. Bring a baby into a group of people and everyone turns to that Child – to hold the child, make the child smile, ooh and ahh a bit and feel ourselves moved by the gift of this life. That's how the Lord makes us turn to Him ... not to awe us with power but invite us with love, making Himself like us so we can draw near. Our own weakness and smallness do not separate us from this Savior, but unite us to how He most often works in our lives and our world. Whenever we feel fragile in body or spirit, we can know that we are close to God, Who chooses to come to us in precisely this way.

Merry Christmas, Richard David, wherever you are. As you look upon the manger scene this Christmas, ask Mary's prayers, and those of Joseph, so that Elizabeth's words to her cousin Mary might become true for us as well: *Blessed are those who believe that what was spoken by the Lord will be fulfilled.*