

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, 30 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 is an example of how God uses smallness, weakness, powerlessness, to reveal His great love and mercy. *“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 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 ... beginning as an embryo, growing in Mary’s womb; then an infant, almighty yet helpless; born in poverty but infinitely rich in the hidden glory of His divinity. *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 sin and evil, sickness and disease, 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?

The evidence is so clear throughout history 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.*

In a troubled world with so many problems and worries, we might be tempted to wonder: can God's grace really change things in the world? Who am I that the Lord should come to me? *Think of the small, the unlikely, the seemingly impossible things in your life, and bring them into the picture of the Christmas revelation of God's greatness and nearness that comes in the face of a Child.* Jesus meets us in a way that does not awe us with power but invites 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 frail and 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.*