

You know I like to have pictures up during our readings,
to illuminate what we're hearing. It was really hard to find a picture to use
during our reading from Isaiah today, with its imagery of nursing breasts.
There are many classical pictures of Mary nursing Jesus, but they all seemed a
bit much to confront us on our screens on a Sunday morning.
I was very surprised the first time I came across this reading from Isaiah –
In a Bible and tradition full of male imagery for God,
here is a frank and profoundly feminine metaphor.
And what a wonderful metaphor for what it means to live generously –
to give of your own self, as much as is needed, and trust there will be more.

This Advent we're exploring how we live God's life in a world that has turned
upside down. We've examined what it means to Live Ready, and Live Clearly.
Today it's "Live Generously," and one model of that is Mary of Nazareth.
From the moment that angel appeared before her,
she was asked to give more than must have been comfortable.
She had to put her plans on hold, her life on the line, her preferred future aside.
She bore the risk of a broken engagement –
how would her betrothed view her unanticipated pregnancy?
She bore the risk of death, which was the penalty for adultery –
which is why the part of the story where the angel tells Joseph to go ahead
with the marriage is so important.
She bore the danger and discomfort of a journey to Bethlehem at the whim of the
Roman emperor, and a later journey and exile to Egypt to keep this child safe...

And she bore Jesus into this world, a gift she would never get to keep.
She became Jesus' mother, and she had to feed and protect him.
She had to nurse him, keep him fed from those breasts that are like God's love.
But here's the thing: she didn't have to go out and get breast milk for him –
It was there, part and parcel of the whole beautiful mystery of birth,
generated by the hormones that kicked in when that process began.
That milk would be there whenever Jesus needed it, and when he was ready to
be fed on solid food, it would stop flowing until the next child came along.
That's how God's provision works! God gives us what we need in the times
when we need it, and when we no longer need that, we're fed in other ways.

This is also the way we are invited to give generously to others – to trust that we have plenty to give, and it will keep flowing as long as the need is there. We don't have to generate what we give – it's already been given to us. We may need to release it, not hold it quite so tight, but we don't have to go find it. It's like that manna in the wilderness for the people of Israel – it came every night, and they had all they needed. But if they tried to hoard it, it went bad. When we live with our hands and hearts open, we have plenty to give.

There is a spiritual principle that, when everyone gives what they can, there is enough for everybody.

Paul writes about it when he urges the churches in Corinth to join into a regional effort to collect relief funds for the churches in the Jerusalem area, suffering during a famine. He said, do it regularly, give out of your plenty, out of what you have, not what you don't.

And when you are in need, trust that the resources will come to you.

There is something to that principle that has worked for over 2000 years, for those who trust it, for those who buy into it.

I've experienced it many times in my life, but most notably when I was ready to go to seminary and didn't know how I was going to pay a Yale tuition. My rector sent out a letter to the parish, inviting people to give. This was a church at which I had poured out my heart, soul, time and energy for 22 years. I did that mostly out of love, probably a little out of need, but I lived generously. And man, did that generosity flow back to me! I thought maybe we'd raise about \$5,000 at most. We got up to that in a few weeks, and then one person made a gift of \$5,000 himself. That's when I knew we were in God territory – each time I learned of a new donation, or saw the new total, I felt like God was laughing. In the end more than \$20,000 flowed into that fund, from a community that knew how to live generously, that taught me how to live generously.

If we don't trust it, if we assume scarcity, that's often what we experience.

When we assume abundance, when we live abundantly, when we give and receive abundantly, we find there is enough, and to spare.

A full measure, pressed down, overflowing will be poured into our laps, Jesus said. Enough, enough, enough.

I will also invite you to apply this principle to pledge toward God's work at these two churches.

God is on the move in us and through us, connecting us to more and more people. Yesterday more than 175 children came through our parking lot. We didn't give anything, beyond a little time from me and Joan.

We just gave out of our plenty, living generously.

This week, a young mother reached out on Facebook to see if we might help with Christmas gifts for her son in a hard time – parishioners responded with gifts and a Christmas dinner basket – living generously.

After today's service, Neal Bankenstein is going to tell us about ways we might give of our time to children and youth in our public schools – imagine the connections that will build, from these churches, out into our community, with people who are different from us. Live generously.

That's what God is up to at Christ Church – so if you have not pledged, try it.

Pledge a given amount, a percentage of your income, that you can manage – it should stretch you a little but not too much. Live generously.

Living generously is not only about giving money or sharing with those in need – need is only one place where generosity comes into play.

To live generously also extends to our basic orientation toward life, to expecting abundance. As God's people, we take a generous view of things. So if a situation could go badly or well, we assume generosity will flow in that situation, from us and to us. It may or may not, but our orientation as ones who live generously is toward assuming generosity.

We need to live generously in our relationships – big time.

That's where constriction and stuckness and grievance and a need to be right bring us inward toward a hoarding or a holding; we hold grudges, we hold in our feelings.

To live generously is to be generous with our feelings, all of them!

Be generous with our anger, so that it doesn't collect and grow;

Be generous with our approval – how often do we not tell people when they're doing a great job, or just how fabulous they are, how happy we are to know them?

We take it for granted that they know – but friends, who doesn't love to be told?

My mother's cousins were beautiful and smart, lovely women,

but their mother refused to tell them lest they get a swelled head.

"Pretty is as pretty does," she'd say. They were always insecure.

So be generous in your praise, don't be stingy, stinting, or sparing with your affirmation of others – or of yourself.

To live generously is also to be generous in your spirit;
to be generous to yourself, to be generous toward God, to be lavish.
So pick up the check; buy that thing your son or daughter doesn't need,
Give more to that relief fund than you're comfortable with.
There will be enough, for nothing is impossible with God.

God's life flows as abundantly as mother's milk, as water from a rock.
Let it flow into you. Let it flow through you. Let it flow.

Amen.

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.'* But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?*' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born* will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Isaiah 66:1-13

Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her;
rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her—
that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast;
that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom.

For thus says the Lord: I will extend prosperity to her like a river,
and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream;
and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm, and dandled on her knees.
As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.