

Leaping for Joy/ Finding your Voice

Luke 1:39-55

Finally, a real Christmas story. No angels, but pregnant women and leaping babies and Mary's Magnificat, and not a minute too soon. After long weeks of apocalypse and shouting prophets, we are due a little wonderment. Something familiar and particular to this season, and this season only.

There is something a little unsettling about just popping into the middle of the story, though. We haven't heard a peep out of Elizabeth or Mary yet this year, and suddenly we're privy to a rather intimate and extraordinary moment between them. The purveyors of the Revised Common Lectionary take a lot of liberties, it seems to me, assuming in this day and age that there is a familiarity with the women and their stories; that we all know everything we need to know about Mary and Elizabeth, and how they got to this moment. That may not be a fair assumption anymore, so before we try to figure out what they have to say to us today, let's take a moment to introduce them properly.

It's tempting to say that Mary needs no introduction; we know all about her. We know her from two thousand years of artwork that depicts her trusting, humble, and then broken nature, her willingness to say yes to God, no matter what it may cost her. But I worry that, with all of the adulation we heaped on Mary, we have matured her far beyond her years, and the almost unworldly wisdom and peace that we attribute to her almost robs her of her humanity. Mary was trusting; Mary was graciously obedient to God's call. But Mary was also not much more than a child, and her gracious obedience turned her life upside down. Her "yes" to Gabriel was a yes that made her an outcast, the talk of the town, the object of scorn and derision and speculation. The public's hunger to know all the sordid details didn't start with Tiger Woods' car crash. Mary's life became something of a nightmare the minute she agreed to be the handmaiden of the Lord.

And then there was Elizabeth, the aging preacher's wife who was winding down her years in the backwater hills of Judea. Also the object of scorn and derision, shamed, not because of her failure to behave herself, but because of her failure to produce children. Children were the sign that God thought well of you; they were your reward for right and righteous living. The priest's wife being barren was like the preacher's kid who goes afoul. It was the cause for talk and speculation and a lot of raised eyebrows.

I guess what I am trying to say here is that these two model, extraordinary women were not models at all. Between them, they had nearly every strike against them needed to make them outcasts in both town and Temple. They were poor, powerless and female and common. Rural. Their morals and piety were suspect. If it weren't for their unusual pregnancies, they would be invisible to the world around them. Not hardly the sorts of people that one might expect God to tap on the shoulder to assume such important jobs as bearing and raising the Messiah and his herald. They were all wrong, everything about them.

If there was anything particularly remarkable about Mary and Elizabeth, this scene is where it becomes evident. Now, I'm not going to say that in the three months that Mary stayed with Elizabeth they never succumbed to the female tendency to whine about stretch marks or any of the multitude of other havocs that pregnancy wreaks on a body. It's quite possible that they spent evenings painting their toenails or crying about things like lost puppies and burnt lentils. They may well have had perfectly normal conversations about perfectly normal, everyday things, but it was their first words to each other that really make their story worth telling.

It wasn't idle chatter, or news about the family; they weren't even words of congratulations, squeals of prenatal delight. They were words, lilting poetry and song, actually, about what God was doing. They recognized that God was doing something, something big – in their own lives, in each others' lives, and in the world – and they proclaimed it. They were prophets, Mary and Elizabeth, the two unlikeliest prophets ever.

Mary's words are the ones that call to me this Advent, at this particular time in the life of our country, the world, and this church. Mary lived at a rough time in history. Israel lived under occupation by the Roman Empire and was governed by the despotic Herod. Taxes were astronomical to fund the Roman army and Herod's building projects, among other things. Freedom was on the hearts and minds of the Jews, but it called to them from a distant place, from their imagination. It had been hundreds and hundreds of years since they had been a free people, politically, religiously, and economically. Life was hard. The future looked uncertain, if not outright grim.

And yet listen to Mary's song. She doesn't sing about what's going on in the world around her. She doesn't sing "Blowing in the Wind" or U2's "Sunday, Bloody Sunday," – no protest songs or laments about all the terrible things in the news, or what the neighbors are gossiping and whining about. Her song isn't about the unfairness of it all, or about how the government is unjust and corrupt. She sings about what she sees God doing, what he had been doing all along, what her son would grow up to do. Now, they were things that you probably had to look closely to see. Clearly God hadn't overthrown all the oppressive powers in the world. Clearly there were still hungry people to be found most everywhere you looked. There were still haughty and blind rich, and there were still hidden, trampled poor. Rome still ran the world and their lives. But in some small, hidden, backwards ways, God was at work. You didn't have to look much farther than Elizabeth and Mary to see it – God was already dethroning the powerful and raising up the poor and lowly. Wrongs were already being righted and the world was already being set straight.

Most of the images of Mary we've been handed seem to extol her for her meekness and submissiveness, and lift them up to us as something worthy of imitating. And yes, Mary did willingly trade her plans and goals and hopes for her life for God's. But if you ask me, that makes her a radical, not meek and submissive. She wasn't a go-along-with-the-crowd kind of girl. She didn't see the world the same way that her neighbors did. She wasn't fearful that things were spiraling downhill. She wasn't convinced that Rome was going to do them in. She wasn't full of doom and gloom. Mary saw a world that God was very much alive and well in. A world that God was still very much at work in. While the world around her was anxious, angry, resentful, Mary was full of hope and joy and expectation.

If you ask me, that's the Mary we should be imitating. The radical, attentive Mary, who recognizes God at work, and tells the world all about it. Think for a moment about the talk you have heard all around you this week, even the kinds of conversations you've been a part of. Worries about the healthcare reform bill, and what it could mean either for our pocketbook or for the people who live without adequate healthcare. Conversations about our President and his leadership abilities. Talk about the climate and whether the powerful nations of the world are sacrificing the earth in pursuit of the dollar. Speculation about Tiger Woods and his personal life. Then of course, there were the more mundane conversations about the weather and our readiness for Christmas, and how we are managing the stress of it all. Around churches conversations have involved concern about the financial condition of the church and the dwindling number of people doing the vast majority of the work.

Not once, not once, have I heard a conversation about what God is doing. Nor have I had one, I will confess. We've worried, we've obsessed, we've grumbled, we've speculated, we've reminisced, we've planned, we've laid out contingencies for worst-case scenarios. But have we given any hint that we believe that God is alive and well and at work in our lives? In our country? In our Church? Have we given voice to our joy and expectation, having seen firsthand that God has not abandoned us, and is even now at work redeeming the world, despite what the news would have us believe?

If Mary has anything to say to us, it isn't that we should be passively, resignedly submissive. What Mary most has to say to us is that no small measure of hope and joy should be finding its way into our conversations with each other. That we should dare to believe that underneath the current of war and economic woes and political maneuvering, God is behind the scenes toiling away, lifting up the lowly and bringing down the powerful, working in your life and mine.

Sometimes the third candle of Advent is pink for joy, but isn't it also about proclamation? Telling the exciting things that we have seen and experienced? Sharing the good news that God is doing something exciting in your life, or at Good Samaritan, or where you work? Being a light in a rather dark, anxious, grumpy world? You've seen God at work, surely you have. If you haven't, you're not paying attention. But if you have, tell it. Sing it. The world needs a little good news.