

Sermon for Advent IV, December 20, 2009

In this Advent season, we are keenly aware that we wait in community for the promises of God to unfold in our lives. From the stories I have already been told right here in the community of St. Andrew, we hold each other up when one of us needs encouragement or support. We help one another search for meaning, weep with one another, rejoice with one another, walk alongside each other. Just as Elizabeth must have listened to Mary, and helped her prepare for what was to come, we help one another work things out when we can. Sometimes, we just sit in the dark quiet and wait, together, trusting in the promises of God, listening for a word from God.

In Kate Huey's reflections on the Gospel for today, she invites us to imagine how these two humble women must have felt about what was happening in their own lives. Henri Nouwen says, "Who could ever understand? Who could ever believe it? Who could ever let it happen? But Mary says, 'Let it happen to me', and she immediately realizes that only Elizabeth will be able to affirm her 'yes'. For three months Mary and Elizabeth live together and encourage each other to truly accept the motherhood given to them." As Nouwen reminds us, neither woman had to wait alone for the extraordinary events to unfold, slowly, as pregnancies do: "They could wait together and thus deepen in each other their faith in God, for whom nothing is impossible. Thus, God's most radical intervention into history was listened to and received in community."

This good news is for us too. We do not have to go through the difficult times alone. No one knows why Mary sets out so soon on the long and dangerous journey to see her cousin, Elizabeth. Joachim and Anna, Mary's parents, do not appear in the story or in the Bible, so we are left to ask did they encourage her to go and if so, why? Perhaps Elizabeth may have been the only person who Mary felt she could talk to. We're left to wonder, and to imagine, that perhaps a frightened Mary looks for reassurance from someone who as Barbara Brown Taylor writes "has always treated her like a full-fledged person, like a friend" ("Magnificat," *Mixed Blessings*).

What is the message of Mary's Song? Have we said it so long that we overlook its message? I have noted over the years that political sermons do not go over very well in most congregations except perhaps among minority communities who perhaps see the "principalities and the powers" of this world more clearly. But we forget that what we read in Scripture, and especially Mary's Song, is full of political messages. Perhaps none more potent than the Magnificat.

Scott McKnight notes that in the 1980s, the government of Guatemala banned this song because it was apparently considered subversive, politically dangerous. Authorities worried that it might incite the oppressed people to riot. From my own visit during that time, I noted that in Latin American base communities people read the Bible and heard in the Good News that God did not want their children to die of hunger and disease, or their husbands and sons to be disappeared. All sorts of “trouble” can start when the people get their hands on the Bible. Maybe the governmental authorities of Guatemala were just paying more attention than most of us pay when we read Scripture or sing our hymns. “What, for example, does it mean when we sing this Christmas that the baby born this day “rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of God’s righteousness and wonders of God’s love””? (John Ortberg in *The Christian Century*)

We all long for a time when suffering will end and everyone will have enough, when nations and families will live in peace, and the earth will be restored and healed of the damage that has been done. This is a vision for the future, but we live in the present, counting on the promises of God. Mary had the nerve and the imagination to claim such a future for herself and her people.

Some of us look back longingly on Christmases past, hoping to re-create better, more secure, less troubled times when our loved ones will be out of harm’s way. Many folks are grieving or depressed or lonely during the holiday season, and the church’s call is to tell the story once again, to comfort and inspire and *just be with* those who need help in looking forward in hope.

The Reverend Jo Hudson, writes evocatively in her church’s daily devotional of the power of Christmas carols to “speak to the deep places of my wandering from God and my wondering about God.” Perhaps that’s why carols are so beloved, so imprinted on our hearts and souls. In a world that longs for a gentle peace, a generous sharing of the goods of the earth, a time of quiet joy and healing, we stand by our windows with Mary, expectant with hope and filled to the brim with joy because we have seen in every moment of tender love and forgiveness the promise of what is yet to come. We sing with Mary, and we move with her song. (Kate Huey)