

## Dec. 18, 2016 Advent IV

### Luke 1:26-38 Bursting with God-News

From time to time, you may hear me repeat an old aboriginal saying, "I don't know if things actually happened in this way, but I know the story is true." These words offer a way of going to the heart of a story without getting hung up on the details. Instead we ask questions like, "Why has the story been a part of our story for the past 2,000 years?" "What might it say to us?" "What might it ask of us?" "Why does it still speak to our hearts and minds and lives?"

Last night I was out walking. I ran into a very pregnant young woman, accompanied by her mother. The younger said, "I was excited a couple of weeks ago. Now, I'm just tired of waiting." She spoke of how glad she was that her mother was with her, would be there to help catch the baby, would be there to support her. This waiting time, this birthing time, is a sacred time... a vulnerable time, which at its best, binds the generations together. So it is for Mary and for Elizabeth. They are irresistibly drawn to one another.

As our story begins, it is gestating time! It is Advent, and as our poet puts it, "A time to prepare and gestate new ways to bring abundant life and purpose into the world; a time to gather energy for the hard work of birthing Justice and peace.

Elizabeth is older, and said to have been barren. Long years of yearning, hoping, weeping and praying for a child have passed. Elizabeth has moved beyond the heartbreak and found other ways to create, contribute, and to bring life, light, and love into her world. I imagine her just nicely beginning to settle into the comforts of old age when old Gabriel brings Zechariah the astonishing news! In this, her shame (or what is left of it) is lifted... but, "Good God, Why now?"

Stories of untimely birth are common in the Old Testament! Remember Sarah and Abraham? When Abraham delivers the God-news that they will bear a son, Sarah laughs out loud in disbelief. "A child at my age? Ha!" God calls her on her lack of faith, and she denies it! Still, when the child is born, according to God's word, they name him Isaac, meaning, 'laughter'.

Our scriptures are fond of saying things like, "When the time was right...." Well, for Elizabeth, and for Sarah, the time was surely long past. God's time and human time, it seems, do not always intersect in predictable ways. Most of us know what it is like to long and hope for something, or someone, and to finally come to believe the time for such things past. We know what it is like to give up on our dreams.

But then, every once in a while I find myself in a conversation with someone who says with a hint of wonder in their voice, "I never thought I would find love, then John walked into my life with his silly grin, and my heart just took a flip." Or, "I had given up hope that my pain would ever leave. I thought I would live with it for the rest of my life." And, then with a look of incredulity on his face, "I have no pain. The pain is gone." Or, "I thought my world had ended when I lost my job. I never imagined I would find myself doing something like this. I couldn't be happier." Or, "I thought my death warrant had been signed, but it seems I've been granted a victory lap. Whatever time I have now is bonus."

For a while, Michael and I watched a silly sitcom called Ally McBeal. Ally spends episode after episode looking for Mr. Right, and time and again falling for Mr. Wrong. Finally, a young girl unexpectedly walks into her life. In time Ally realizes that it is this child she has been looking for all along. She finds the joy and peace she has been so desperately seeking. She never expected that to happen.

Sometimes our heart's desire is so long in coming, or comes in such disguise, that when it finally comes, we hardly recognize it. We are so taken by surprise that we can only shake our heads in disbelief, and throw our heads back in laughter.

For Elizabeth, as our story begins, her God-surprise at six months, is already viable. He could take up life outside of the womb if he needed to. Already he is kicking and nudging his mother as the Holy Spirit

prompts her to begin his work of announcing the one who is still to come... the one (about the size of a pea now in his mother's womb!) who is at the very door!

Mary's story couldn't be more different. She is not even married--hasn't even slept with a man when old Gabriel gives her the news. She hasn't spent long years waiting and yearning and hoping... she is young, her whole life is ahead of her, and this news, in any ordinary sense, is not good news for her. In spite of this, as our liturgy puts it, she says, "Yes," to divine Mystery, "Yes," to scandal, for the risk of new birth. Mary too is taken utterly by surprise! And yet our Gospel story tells us that she responds with openness, and a readiness to receive a God-news that can only be seen as scandalous and shameful by those closest to her-- her family, her community, and most especially Joseph-her betrothed.

Mary willingly risks judgment, rejection, and personal peril so that she might play her part in responding to the invitation of God to bring this precious new life into the world. Mary is reminiscent of many heroes of the faith, caught off guard, and by all objective measures, unprepared for what they could only name as the call of God on their lives. Time and again--sometimes with a little persuasion (remember Jonah?)— individuals accept an invitation to take their part in the unfolding of the Divine mystery in their particular time and place in history.

Our God, it seems, is a God of surprise. None of us knows when, where, or how we might be called to participate in the unfolding of God's Good News in and for our world. There is a great mystery unfolding at the heart of creation, and none of us knows the way ahead, but from time to time, if we are paying attention, we may glimpse an invitation to play our small part in spreading God's Good News. "Who knows, perhaps it was for such a time as this that we were born." \*

### **Commissioning**

As we find our way to Bethlehem  
May we be God-Bearers –  
accepting the pain and joy of an unknown future  
May we say, "Yes" to divine mystery  
"Yes," to scandal, for the risk of new birth  
"Yes," to the new life that stands before us  
Go in into this Christmas week in  
the light of faith, hope, joy and love  
waiting to be born anew in us

\* ".. born for such a time as this:" There's an Old Testament story in which a beautiful young Jewish woman, named Esther is crowned queen by King Xerxes. One of Xerxes' leaders, Hamen, conspires to kill her adopted father, Mordechai, and all the Jews of the empire with him. Mordechai, approaches the gates of the Palace asking that Esther approach the King on behalf of her people. Esther resists, knowing that such audacity on her part may very well result in her own death. Mordechai urges her, saying, "Who knows, perhaps it was for a time such as this that you were born."

\*\*My son just finished a book entitled, "The Obstacle is the Way!" I don't know if the author has ever read our Jewish and Christian Scriptures, but there seems to be a profound truth hidden in them, as in many wisdom and spiritual traditions, that the, "The Obstacle is the Way," that God's way forward always involves major obstacles, and even impossible situations, which must be overcome, and which in many cases, can only be overcome with the assistance of some form of Divine intervention, in our case, identified as the work of the Holy Spirit.