

Rev. Dr. Mark Allen Doty, Senior Pastor
Hammond Street Congregational Church, UCC
Bangor, Maine
December 23, 2018

Mary's Song
Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

She came into the church office one December day in 2005. The woman had long black hair, and she was wearing a black leather jacket, pants and boots. Brightly colored beads hung from her ears and were fastened to her coat. She said she needed a bus ticket back to Florida. In the space of a few minutes, the woman told an astonishing tale.

She said the trailer she and her husband had been living in near Tampa had been condemned because of black mold. She figured the mold was what killed the man, two days after she had married him. The woman said that she was not eligible for any of her husband's benefits, because in the State of Florida you have to be legally married for a week to be considered a widow.

Her landlord, who wanted her out of his sight, put her on a bus for Maine where her family is located. The woman said that when she moved to Florida she had left some of her belongings in a house in Bangor. Her two sons live in the city, but there is a court order forbidding her to have any contact with them.

When the woman attempted to take her possessions, one son threatened to kill her on three different occasions; this time he swore he would get the job done. The woman's other son promised to dynamite the house if she took anything from it. She decided it would be impossible to take her belongings, and so resolved to go back to Florida.

And then the woman said, "I'm also pregnant and haven't eaten anything for a couple of days. Can you help me get some food and a bus ticket?"

It had been a good while since I had heard such a story of misery. What struck me most was the poignancy of being pregnant during this advent season and having so little for this expectant mother to look forward to.

During the past two Sundays, we have focused on the words of John the Baptist, the forerunner and preparer for Jesus, his cousin. Now in today's lesson, the scripture opens by telling us about John's mother, Elizabeth.

Both Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, were descended from a line of priests. Her lineage was from the house of Aaron, and his was from the house of Abijah. And so it was considered an ideal match for Elizabeth, whose name means "God is my oath," to have married Zechariah, a priest. Earlier in Chapter One, Luke describes this couple as being of faultless character, saying that they were "righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the lord blameless."

Zechariah was a village priest in the hill country of Judea, perhaps near the town of Ain Karem, four miles north of Jerusalem. We know that Elizabeth was a learned woman and could read and write Aramaic and Hebrew. And so as the Gospel records tell us about this aging couple, we see them as people who embodied the highest form of Old Testament piety in a New Testament world.

But there was a problem. Elizabeth was barren. And as we know from the biblical accounts of Hannah and Sarah, the inability to conceive a child in Jewish culture was a tremendous burden. For Elizabeth there was an added pressure: “The twenty-four families of the ‘sons of Aaron’ were responsible in rotation for service in the Temple of Jerusalem. Within each family the individual priest was chosen by lot to tend the brazier on the altar of incense in front of the most holy place” (Ronald Brownrigg) because he was childless, Zechariah had no one to succeed him in carrying out this privileged task.

But one day when Zechariah was at the temple burning the incense, he received a vision from the Angel Gabriel who said, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.” But Zechariah questioned the angel: “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” Because he doubted, Gabriel told Zechariah that he would “become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”

Elizabeth did indeed conceive and remained in seclusion for five months. She said, “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

In the sixth month, the Angel Gabriel announced to Mary—who was perhaps a distant relative of Elizabeth’s—that she also would be expecting a child. And then, as we heard the scripture passage read, Mary went with haste to see Elizabeth. The first sign that something extraordinary was about to happen took place when Elizabeth told Mary, “For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.” In other words, John, the forerunner of the faith, recognized the Messiah prior to his birth. Luke also tells us that Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit—that she became immediately aware of Mary’s exalted position: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

What is perhaps most noteworthy about the reception which Elizabeth gave to Mary is the fact that in Luke 1:56 we read that “Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.” Because Elizabeth was filled with joy, Mary was also. Because Elizabeth was looking forward to the birth of her first child, so Mary, this young woman who had no husband, could also be. And Elizabeth models this hopeful attitude best by inviting Mary to be a guest in her home for an extended period. So Elizabeth, one who is expecting, gives to Mary the gift of expectation.

Webster’s defines “expectation” as “A looking forward to, anticipation; a reason or warrant for looking forward to something; prospect for the future, as of advancement of prosperity.” Expectation as anticipation, as something to hope for, lies at the heart of our belief as Christians. Because we hope, we believe that there will be rainbows after storms. Because

we hope, we believe that our lives will go on after our work on earth is over. Because we hope, we strive for a world in which there will be peace on earth, good will to all people.

And so as we journey through this Advent season, we are filled once again with a sense of hope: a Christmas gathering, a present under the tree, a babe in the manger. This is the gift of expectation. It is that quality which transforms mere waiting and makes it something more.

“All my life I have waited,” a contemporary woman writes, “waited for the project to be completed, waited for supper to be ready, waited for the doctor to see me. I have waited for the traffic light, waited for the right relationship, waited to grow up.

“I have waited alone or waited with friends. I have waited anxiously. I have waited expectantly. Some waits have been ‘worth waiting for.’

“Now it is Advent,” she says, “and I am waiting in the darkness of my soul—ravaged by sorrow, anger, and fear. But I do not despair in the waiting, for I remember the way light looks and feels...and so I hope—for the Messiah to come” (Kathy Clark-Dickens).

You and I do indeed spend much of our lives waiting—waiting that is routine and boring and mindless. But Mary and Elizabeth knew the difference between that kind of waiting and waiting which is infused with excitement and eagerness. That is expectation. We wait to be helped in a department store. We wait to find a parking space. We wait in line at the post office. But we expect the coming of the Messiah.

Mary and Elizabeth knew the difference. The two expectant relatives understood that they would not have pregnancies of mere waiting. The women would have precious times of preparation few others of their kindred had known. Elizabeth sensed that the months ahead would be filled with deep wonder and awe and mystery. And because Elizabeth knew that, she gave to her kinswoman the gift of expectation, the ability to savor each moment until the complete revelation of God’s glory.

You will note that the second half of our scripture reading lists the verses 46-55 in parentheses. That signifies a lesson that continues the passage but also is separate from it. These verses, only found in Luke, are for Mary’s song of praise or the Magnificat or what is sometimes called the Canticle of Mary. The word “Magnificat” is Latin for the opening line, “My Soul Magnifies The Lord.”

In These Ancient, Beautiful Verses, Mary Rejoices In Her Privilege, Looks Forward To God's Transformation Within Her, And Exalts God For Making It All Possible. For Thousands Of years Mary’s song of praise has lifted up the lowly and spoken of mercy for generations past, present and future.

I like what one scholar has said of Mary’s song: “Songs are powerful. Perhaps we should therefore take our cue from Elizabeth and Mary and keep our preached words to a minimum to make room for Mary’s singing” (David Lose, “Commentary, Luke 1:31-45 (45-55), Preaching This Week, WorkingPreacher.org, 2009),

Well said. And so on this Fourth Sunday of Advent we are left with the wisdom and the hopes of a young woman 2,000 years ago-- destined to be the mother of our Messiah. To be sure, Mary has reached out to women throughout history—perhaps even one in 2005 who found herself suddenly in a church--lonely, hungry, pregnant, and in need of a bus ticket.

May that Mary of old and her song continue to inspire God's people in this brave new world, now and always.

Copyright 2018 by the Rev. Dr. Mark Allen Doty