

*Based on Luke 1:39-45. Two Pregnant Women Offer a Safe Space for Hope*

Imagine, if you will, a dress rehearsal for one congregation's first ever Christmas Eve dramatic reading of the Christmas story from start to finish. The arc of the liturgy begins with the archangel Gabriel's announcement to a young Mary and ends with three wise guys showing up with a star and a passel of presents.

Energy and enthusiasm and more than a little anxiety permeate the gathering. Finally, after a few fits and starts and mix-ups, every reader is prepared and in their right place. Musicians are ready. The preacher is standing by. Rehearsal begins.

Unbeknownst to the Pastor, a former drill sergeant has been assigned the role of the archangel Gabriel. Down the aisle Drill Sergeant Gabriel stomps, setting the tone of the entire service, her deep contralto voice barking out the order of the day:

*You WILL conceive in your womb and bear a son.* Gabriel thunders.

*You WILL call him Jesus!*

A terrified teenage Mary trembles in the chancel, having completely forgotten her lines. The rest of the readers burst out laughing at this hilarious rendering of the Christmas story. The pastor dives under the communion table in embarrassment.

*Don't you think you could be a little gentler when you say your lines?* someone suggests to Gabriel, once they have all come up for air. *We don't want to scare away the whole congregation on Christmas Eve.*

A chagrined Gabriel agrees to modulate her tone of voice. The rehearsal proceeds. Mary remembers her lines. Christmas Eve worship goes off without a hitch. Joy to the world, the Lord is come.

But the question lingers, especially in this season of increasing threats to women's moral agency when it comes to making choices about bearing children. Is God, through Gabriel, truly like a drill sergeant barking orders we best follow if we know what is good for us? Or is this a kinder, gentler invitation, suitable for Christmas Eve worship, with a true *choice* for someone so young and so vulnerable?

Truthfully, the text itself could be argued either way. Which of course means yours truly will say that God does, indeed, grant Mary moral agency with regard to her pregnancy, along with a gentle, compassionate presence as she navigates the twists and turns that come with that choice. Just as God offers all of those things to you and to me in all of the choices we must make with our lives.

Even so, Mary is anxious for human – and specifically feminine – support through it all. A safe place, devoid of the drill sergeant mentality, to share her highest hopes and deepest fears. Community and connection in the midst of her choices. As are we all. So Mary sets out – with haste! – to her kinswoman, Elizabeth, walking some 80 miles on foot stretched out over four days just to find that support.

It turns out Elizabeth is anxious, as well. It is one thing to be young and innocent and open to life's wildest adventures, as Mary is. It is entirely different to be older and wiser and set in your ways, with the world pretty

much figured out, as Elizabeth has been. A well-respected, though barren, wife of a well-respected, though childless, priest. Disappointed and perhaps even ashamed underneath the veneer of her sophistication. But resigned, with a certain sense of peace, I would venture to guess, with her lot in life. Right up until everything changes with her unexpected pregnancy and her choice to carry it to term.

Both women are at high risk with their choices: Mary as a cultural pariah and Elizabeth as “a woman of a certain age.” Both women find solace in one another. And not only solace but pride.

As we said in our Teach the Preacher gathering this week, Mary comes to Elizabeth *in trouble*. And Elizabeth responds to that trouble by declaring, *You are blessed*. Which in the Greek means *people are speaking well of you*, Mary. People are speaking *well* of your child. Perhaps, again as we said in our Teach the Preacher gathering, the blessing is actually *in* the trouble.

And you are *enough*, Mary implies in response, no matter what your maternal status has been in the past, or is today, or will be in the future. You always were and you always will be *enough*, no matter what choices you make about this pregnancy.

*You are blessed.*

*You are enough.*

*You are blessed.*

*You are enough.*

Some three months pass as Elizabeth and Mary find solace and pride in one another, as they bless one another with gentleness and compassion along their shared journey. As they share their hopes and fears with one another. As they tend their inner selves, bare their wounds, discern the movement of the Spirit, and navigate the intended *and unintended* consequences of their choices with one another.

As they do so throughout these three months, Mary and Elizabeth come to reflect on their individual choices in the context of global solidarity with all who labor for justice. They come to find fortune in the prophetic presence gestating within them. They come to sing of hope magnified in the Blessed Event yet to come for them both.

We sing this hope today in the birth of the child that is given them both, in the birth of the children given to us all, including those who lead us to *Prepare the Way* at the conclusion of this service, resurrecting one of the most treasured traditions of our congregation. Therein *does* lie our hope to be sure.

Hope is *also* found in our Lesson today in the strength and the courage of a young and vulnerable woman walking eighty miles on foot in search of a safe place to make sense of it all. Hope is *also* found in our Lesson today in the courage and compassion of the wise older woman blessing the *trouble* of youth at her doorstep. Hope is in fact *magnified* in our Lesson today when strength and courage and compassion combine to use two individual choices to turn the entire world around.

*You are blessed.*

*You are enough.*

We could argue this three-month love fest between Mary and Elizabeth in the Gospel of Luke is the beginning of The Church. That safe place of blessing and enoughness. For those who appear to be in trouble *and* for those who seem to have it all together on the outside but are dying just a little every day on the inside.

If that is so, then the invitation for us on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, 2021 is much the same as it was for them:

We make the best choices we can, in light of the wisdom of the Spirit that is given to us. We go to any lengths necessary to find the support we need in navigating those choices. We welcome with blessing those who land on our doorstep with their troubles. We place our choices in the context of global solidarity with all who labor for justice. We trust we are always *enough* whatever consequences of those choices – intended *and unintended* – turn out to be.

When we do these things, as The Church Birthing Hope Through an Ongoing Pandemic, I promise you, in the spirit of that Drill Sergeant Gabriel, we *will* conceive God's promised healing of the world, and we *will* call that healing *Emmanuel – God With Us*. And we *will* be blessed, as those who have trusted our choices to the goodness of our generous God.

Let the church say, Amen!