

Last week, John the Baptist was the messenger of the Good News. There was talk about axes, pitchforks, and unquenchable fires—even the suggestion that we are snakes in the grass who only seek God when our own snake pits are on fire. Yikes!

So it is kind of a relief this morning to hear from a different messenger—not John the Baptist but Mary the Prophet, who will also turn out to be Mary the mother of Jesus, but not yet. Today she is still a maiden, chosen by God to bear a message before she ever bears a child.

Her cousin Elizabeth is the first one to hear what Mary has to say, maybe because Elizabeth is the first one willing to listen. She too is pregnant, Luke says—about six months further along than Mary, and much, much older—so old, in fact, that her impending motherhood is as much a miracle as Mary's. So she and Mary have a lot in common. The obvious difference is that, in Elizabeth's case, there is a biological father hanging around—Zechariah by name, a priest in the order of Abijah who has not said a word in months.

In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, “We almost never hear his story in church, which is too bad, since he and Mary have something in common too. According to the story, they have both been visited by the angel Gabriel, who went to tell Zechariah about his and Elizabeth's baby-to-be before he ever went to tell Mary about hers. Unfortunately, Zechariah's visitation did NOT go as well as Mary's did. When the angel told Zechariah that Elizabeth would bear a son whose name would be John, Zechariah said, ‘How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.’ For this apparent impertinence, the angel zipped Zechariah's lips, making him mute until the day he heard his son cry out for the first time.

Six months later, when Gabriel told Mary that *she* would bear a son, she said more or less the same thing. ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ But for some reason the angel went easier on her. He told her that the Holy Spirit would come to her, that the power of the Most High would overshadow her, and instead of asking any more questions, she said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’

So, kind of interesting—I think—that Zechariah is the very one in this scene without a voice, literally, since he’s struck speechless during his angelic visit. And he’s the priest in the house—the learned professional—the knows-what-he’s-talking about expert in matters of faith. The stage is set this week, then, for us to have the rare opportunity to hear from the women and children for a change. And what a change they dream of!

And so, Mary goes to visit Elizabeth and Zechariah. It is all women’s voices in the house that day!

In his book *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey*, Henry Nouwen provides a thoughtful reflection on the encounter between Elizabeth and Mary. His meditation draws our attention to the easily missed things that are happening to and with the “little ones” in our Scripture texts. It may be true that the mighty are brought down and the promises of old are kept, but in the meantime, on a dusty road, on a well-swept doorstep, two women meet to share the ancient, womanly experience of being with child.

Advent is indeed a time of waiting, a time pregnant with hope. On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, Mary and Elizabeth could be seen as two ordinary, pregnant women in the most extraordinary time and circumstances, on the brink of greatness but first tending to

their relationship with each other and with God. Motherhood is daunting to every woman, especially the first time around, and these two women have found themselves pregnant under the most unusual and unexpected terms, one past the age to conceive, and the other a virgin. So, like women in every place and time, they spend time together, keeping each other company, learning and praying and probably laughing together, as they face first-time childbirth and motherhood.

The new life promised in Mary's pregnancy, of course, is the focus of our Gospel story, as it fulfills promises to all humankind, but one wonders how these two humble women must have felt about what was going on in their own lives. Nouwen asks, "Who could ever understand?" And yet Mary knows that she can count on Elizabeth "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 puts it, neither woman had to wait alone for the extraordinary events to unfold, slowly, as pregnancies do, and they found their faith deepened as the days passed. "Thus," Nouwen writes, "God's most radical intervention into history was listened to and received in community."

In this Advent season, we in the church are keenly aware that we wait not alone but in community for the promises of God to unfold in our lives. Here, in community, you hold each other up when one of you needs encouragement or support. You help one another search for meaning, 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, you help one another work things out. You continue to do that during this transitional time in the life of St. Paul's UCC. Sometimes we may

just sit in the dark quiet and wait, together, trusting in the promises of God, listening for a word from the Stillspeaking God. And in the midst of our waiting, as Paul, writing from prison, encouraged the Philippians, as Hannah and Mary sang God's praise, and as Elizabeth welcomed her beloved cousin and companion, we rejoice, our hearts dancing within us. That is the way we move with Mary's song.

Barbara Brown Taylor says this about Mary's plight, disadvantaged in the system: "What she does not have is a sonogram, or a husband, or an affidavit from the Holy Spirit that says, 'The child really is mine. Now leave the poor girl alone.'" But the young girl doesn't have to explain her situation to Elizabeth, or ask her questions in search of answers, or even ask for acceptance. When Mary sees her much older cousin, Taylor imagines, she sees a woman "so full of life that it is hard to see much beyond her joy." Is it any surprise, then, that in her relief and joy, Mary begins to sing?

Taylor says that Mary sings not just for Elizabeth and Zechariah but for "every son and daughter who thought God has forgotten the promise to be with them forever, to love them forever, to give them fresh and endless life."

We all long for a time when suffering will end, and the pandemic will be under control.

We all long for a time when 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 somehow had the nerve and the imagination to claim such a future for herself and her people, but Taylor says that "she was

singing about it ahead of time—not in the future tense but in the past, as if the promise had already come true. Prophets almost never get their verb tenses straight, because part of their gift is being able to see the world as God sees it—not divided into things that are already over and done AND things that have not happened yet, but as an unfolding mystery that surprises everyone.” Kind of hard to wrap one’s mind around that...but maybe a prompt for us all to mix up our tenses in a faithful manner also.

We are now in the last week of Advent, on the verge of another Christmas celebration, learning from Mary, Fred Craddock says, to “stand expectantly at hope’s window.”

Some of us look back longingly on Christmases past, hoping to re-create better, more secure, less troubled times. Many folks are grieving or depressed or lonely during this holiday season, and the church’s call is to tell the story once again, to comfort and inspire and just to *be* with those who need help in looking forward with a sense of hope, whether they are young or old, rich or poor, inside the community of faith or outside on the margins, longing to come in.

How is God at work in the life of this community of faith? In what ways does it make a difference that we listen for God’s word in community rather than alone? How have you all, together, deepened your faith in ways you might not have experienced in isolation? What is your greatest hope this season?

May we sing with Mary, then, and may we move with her song.

