

Advent3B11

Luke 1:26-56 (this includes the usual text for 4B)

As Jack Kornfield recounts in the book, A Path With Heart (1), it is the custom in one east African tribe that when a woman decides to have a child, she goes and sits alone under a tree, and she listens. She listens until she hears the song of the child who wants to come.

Once she hears the song, she returns to the man who will be the child's father and teaches the song to him. When they make love to conceive the child, they sing the song to call the child to them.

When the woman is pregnant, she teaches the child's song to the midwives and old women of the village so that when the birth time arrives, the people surrounding the mother sing the song to welcome the child among them.

Then as the child grows up, the other villagers learn the song. If the child falls or hurts his knee someone picks him up and sings the song. When the child does something wonderful, the people of the village sing this song. When the child goes through the rites of puberty and becomes an adult, the villagers sing the song.

It goes this way through life. At a wedding, the songs of husband and wife are sung together. Finally, when this child grows old, and lies in bed ready to die, all the villagers know the song, and they sing it for the last time as they sing the person into the next life.

This morning we hear that both Mary and her cousin, Elizabeth, are pregnant. They are both scandalous pregnancies, the one because the woman is old and long past child-bearing age - but at least there is a visible and morally recognizable father of the baby; the other pregnancy is scandalous because, even though the 13 year old girl - yes, that's right, Mary was most likely 13 years old - is betrothed, she is not yet legally married. She belongs to Joseph, legally more than engaged as we think of it now, but there would have been no sex yet. And here she is, pregnant. Either Joseph has used her horribly, or Mary has been unfaithful. Either way, Mary is in trouble - big time. Joseph, when he finds out about the pregnancy, could have her stoned because she was guilty of adultery. Matthew, in his birth story, tells us that Joseph plans to "dismiss Mary quietly, not wanting to disgrace her" - but a visit by an angel changed his mind. Luke doesn't tell us how Joseph responded to the news, only that he and Mary went to Bethlehem to be enrolled and that she was pregnant at that point.

Why doesn't Luke see fit to describe Joseph's reaction to the news of

the pregnancy? Perhaps it's because, to Luke, the way that Mary responds to the news is far more important. And how does Mary respond to the news from the angel? She responds by singing God's praises. She says the words we know as the Magnificat, which is the first word of the first line: Magnificat anima mea Dominum, my soul doth magnify the Lord (magnify is archaic meaning to glorify, praise, or extol). "For with God nothing will be impossible," the angel tells her. And Mary tells the angel, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word." And Elizabeth says of her cousin, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

In one of his sermons, Martin Luther once said that three miracles happened when Jesus was born in Bethlehem: God became a human being, a virgin conceived, Mary believed. Of these, said Luther, the greatest Christmas miracle was this: Mary believed. Regardless of her low estate as a female in that culture, her virtual anonymity, her human fears and uncertainties, Mary believed. That's why Elizabeth called her 'blessed.'

Mary was so sure of God's promise that she spoke in the past tense, "as if the promise had already come true (the proud are scattered, the powerful brought down, the lowly lifted up, the hungry are fed, and the rich are sent empty away). Her faith is in things not seen, faith that comes to her from outside herself, and that is why we celebrate her as blessed" (2). Does Mary, this 13-year-old girl, responding with such faith, surprise us anymore? I don't think so. I think that when we hear the Christmas story, in its combination of passages from Luke and Matthew we often fail to realize how truly miraculous this whole thing was.

God came to earth. God asked a young girl to put her life and reputation on the line, God asked a man to accept an incredible tale from an angel, a baby was born that was God come to earth in human form. God reached out to Mary - and Joseph, and they reached right back. In today's language, God asked Mary to dance - and Mary took God's hand and waltzed all the way to a stable. She did not know what lay ahead, but she had faith. As one writer said, "All she has is her unreasonable willingness to believe that the God who has chosen her will be part of whatever happens next - and that, apparently, is enough to make her burst into song. She does not wait to see how things turn out first. She sings ahead of time, and all the angels with her." (3)

It is a radical message that she has for those people who lived then and we here today listening to her song once again, for God is as active now in bringing about the kingdom as God was then. Advent expects that transition from the status quo to the new age, where the lowly and oppressed

will be lifted up, and those in power will be cast down. We have been waiting and continue to wait in these Sundays for this deliverance. Now we stand on the threshold of that expected salvation, just two weeks away. Let these next two weeks be a time of claiming the promises of God, of celebration of their fulfillment in the advent of Jesus among us. (4)

Of all the gifts I wish you for Christmas, the one gift I wish more than anything else, is the gift of faith. It is a gift of believing that, not only is God able to do wonders out there in the universe somewhere, but that God is able to perform wonders right here - among you and me. It's the hope that was voiced in the prayer of Phillips Brooks: "O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray, Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.

God asks you this day to dance - it doesn't mean that your life will be all happy, or fulfilled, or content. But it does mean that, if you accept the hand that God offers to you, you will, like Mary, know a God who is faithful, loving, a keeper of promises.

My prayer is that all of us will adopt Mary's song as our own, where her song can be sung with our words and with our lives so that it becomes a legacy that we pass on to future generations.

"May your souls magnify the Lord, and your spirits rejoice in God your Savior. For the Mighty One has done great things for you, and holy is God's name." Amen.

1. Jack Kornfield, A Path With Heart,
2. Barbara Brown Taylor, Gospel Medicine
3. Ibid
4. Paraphrase of William Willimon;