

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
December 23, 2018 - Advent 4
Calm and Bright
Title: Let Us Sing - Hope
Scripture: Isaiah 9:6
Luke 1:39-55

This week I was reading a book called, "Christmas from the Back Side" by J. Ellsworth Kalas. I like the way he often sheds a new light on familiar scripture. His chapter, "Christmas comes to a back fence" did that for me this week. He seldom says anything that is really new, but much more along the line of "Well, of course, I knew that, but never really thought about it that way." In this chapter he is focused on today's Gospel reading, Mary's visit to her much older cousin Elizabeth.

He says that in this visit "Christmas shows us that no part of life is unimportant to God, and that none of it is beyond God's interest. And if that be so, not one of us is beyond God's care and concern. The Christmas story dramatically reveals that God is not a far-distant, inapproachable object of worship, but one who chose to come into our world and live in our midst – and to do so in the most ordinary of circumstances."ⁱ

Mary was a very common young girl in the village of Nazareth. She was engaged to Joseph, but in the middle of an ordinary day, an angel came to her and told her that she would soon have a child. The child would be called God's Son and she was to name him Jesus. Mary is often portrayed as a meek, young girl, being submissive when she says to the angel, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said."

But there was much more to Mary than that. In her culture, she faced the possibility of being killed or at least being cast out of respectable society because Joseph was not the father of her child. She might have been afraid of the words of the angel. Indeed, the angel did begin the message by saying, “Do not be afraid.” But it turns out that Mary, although very young, was also a strong Jewish woman, ready to look danger in the eye. Mary believed in the faithfulness of God’s promise and that faithfulness took her past fear and helped her find her place in hope. She was rooted in the hope that had kept her people alive for thousands of years.

In the Christmas novel called Santa & Pete, there is a wonderful line that says that faith is “the thing that helps you hold on til help arrives.”ⁱⁱ

One of the commentators pointed out that Mary was like the man in the sixth chapter of Luke who build his house upon a rock and when the winds and rains came, the foundation of his house could not be shaken.ⁱⁱⁱ Mary’s house has certainly been shaken by the appearance of the angel and his announcement to her, but she chooses to respond out of hope and faith, not fear.

This isn’t the first time we’ve encountered fear in the weeks of Advent. There was plenty to be afraid of in Mary’s culture, but Mary’s faith in God’s promises was so strong that even though she couldn’t understand what was happening; even though she didn’t see the whole picture, she chose to respond out of hope. The Roman empire and the Great Pax Romana, Roman Peace, were really about tyranny and tyranny only works when you have all the power over a people.

“Tyrants have to be afraid of losing power in order to stay vigilant enough to ward off threats to that power. When power becomes a god, you fear losing it. When you reign by fear, you live by fear.”^{iv}

But for many of the Jewish people, and for Mary, despite living under Rome’s tyranny, fear had not been allowed to take control of their lives. “Sometimes we can all get caught up in the fear story.” It can be compelling and when we are convinced by fear, we can believe that the only way to stay “safe” is to put up defenses against whatever it is that we believe threatens us. I read an acronym that says that FEAR stands for “False Evidence Appearing Real”.^v

There are many kinds of tyranny in our world. Certainly, there is the tyranny found in some governments, but we can also be controlled by the circumstances of our lives. This may include abusive relationships, or broken relationships that we cannot forgive or cannot restore. We can be controlled by the tyranny of seeking perfection, money, status, upward mobility, addiction or any number of things. These things come to us appearing as the only reality and trying to control our lives.

Mary and some other Jewish persons of her time recognized that what seems to be real is not always what is real. They were able to recognize that the tyranny of Rome while it did control much of their lives was not the only or the final answer. They knew that God promised something different and when the angel appeared to Mary, she was able to see and respond to the hope. Mary knew that there was another reality that was more powerful than the tyranny of Rome.

Mary didn’t know the end of the story, but we do. We know that the child she would bear was truly the Son of God. We know about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. We know about the power of God’s love – a love

that is stronger and more powerful than any tyranny we can encounter. Mary didn't know the end of the story, but she knew enough to know that the birth of this child would change the world.

The angel told Mary that her much older cousin Elizabeth was also pregnant because "nothing is impossible for God". Mary hurried to visit Elizabeth. Luke tells us that Mary had no sooner arrived when Elizabeth's baby leapt within her. Luke tells us that when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, she was filled with the Holy Spirit. She was the first person in Luke's gospel to be described as filled with the Holy Spirit.

Kalas says that he is fascinated "to see that the first New Testament report of someone being filled with the Holy Spirit comes from this domestic scene, where two women are soon to compare notes on pregnancy and on the marvel of God's work in their lives." He is fascinated, "not because the setting is so extraordinary, but because it reminds (us) that we ought more often to expect God's Spirit to be manifest in the kitchen, the bedroom, the boardroom, the classroom."^{vi}

Elizabeth announces that God has blessed Mary above all women and blessed the child she is carrying. Remember that at this point, only Mary knows that she is pregnant. And then Elizabeth asks, "Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" This is one more strong example of the way that God's Spirit comes to common ordinary people, people just like you and me.

Mary, a typical young woman, suddenly discovering that her life has changed, went to her cousin Elizabeth. Who better to be with? Who better to understand what was happening in her life? They spent three months together. It must have been three months of sharing their hopes and dreams, their fears and their concerns. Two pregnant women together –

you can imagine what some of the conversation must have been. As Kalas reminds us, there is no part of life that is not important to God. There is no part of life that cannot be made holy by God's presence.

Mary gives word to the hope that is so important to her. Her words, known as the Magnificat, are considered by some to be the best poetry or song ever written. As Kalas points out, it takes place in the same way as conversations might over a back fence. It gives witness to the hope that was so much a part of Mary and Elizabeth's life. Their lives were filled not with wishes that things would be different, but with hope that they will be different.

Henri Nouwen notes that there is an important difference between wishes and hope. He wrote that "Hope is something very different. Hope is trusting that something will be fulfilled but fulfilled according to the promise and not just according to our wishes. Therefore, hope is always open-ended." He says that Mary in agreeing to the angel was trusting so deeply that her waiting was open to all possibilities. She didn't want or need to control, but she was willing to trust what was going to happen, even if she didn't really understand it.

He reminds us that "The spiritual life is a life in which we wait, actively present to the moment, trusting that new things will happen to us, new things that are far beyond our own imagination, fantasy, or prediction. That, indeed, is a very radical stance toward life in a world preoccupied with control."^{vii}

Mary and Elizabeth's visit witnesses to the importance of relationships, of community, of being present to and with each other especially during times of change, times of uncertainty. Nouwen says it so much better than I could, "The whole meaning of the Christian community

lies in offering a space in which we wait for that which we have already seen. Christian community is the place where we keep the flame alive among us and take it seriously, so that it can grow and become stronger in us.

“In this way we can live with courage, trusting that there is a spiritual power in us that allows us to live in this world without being seduced constantly by despair, loss, and darkness. That is how we dare to say that God is a God of love even when we see hatred all around us. That is why we can claim that God is a God of life even when we see death and destruction and agony all around us.

“We say it together. We affirm it in one another. Waiting together, nurturing what has already begun, expecting its fulfillment – that is the meaning of ... friendship, community, and the Christian life...

“We need to wait together to keep each other at home spiritually, so that when the word comes it can become flesh in us. That is why the book of God is always in the midst of those who gather. We read the word so that the word can become flesh and have a whole new life in us.”^{viii}

Mary went to visit with Elizabeth. Frequently, when something is happening in our lives, we do the same thing. We call someone we know will understand. When we know something is happening in the life of another person, we may reach out as a witness to the reality that we are never alone. Whatever is happening in our lives, there are people who are willing to walk with us.

“Elizabeth and Mary came together and enabled each other to wait. One of the most beautiful expressions of what it means to form community is to be together, gathered around a promise, affirming that something is really happening.” Community can be what helps us to keep the flame

alive within and among us. Keeping the flame alive takes seriously that together we can grow and become stronger. That flame, that community becomes a spiritual power in us that allows us to live in this world without being seduced constantly by despair, lostness and darkness.^{ix}

God came to Mary and Elizabeth, common women, women who were on the outside, women without any power or political voice or clout. God came to women who could have been filled with fear but were instead filled with hope.

God comes to common ordinary people, just like us. Christmas comes to the common everyday people. Christmas came to Mary and Elizabeth. Christmas came to shepherds – night workers out in the field.

Kalas points out that “Christmas came to the world of the commonplace, the world of back fences and midmorning snacks.... God did it in an everyday place where people talk and cook, where they lay down their jacket when they return from the outdoors.” (p.34)

He says, “So if you’re wondering where Christmas will happen this year, I’ll answer with a question: Where do you expect to be? Because Christmas is meant to happen where we are. God enters our ordinary days, our routine patterns – sometimes a back fence, sometimes the world of shared confidences, sometimes the kitchen of a modest home, sometimes the carefully arranged dinner party.” (p.35)

My prayer for us is that this year, Christmas will come for everyone, everyone alive. It’s not in our bulletin, but I want to invite you to turn to page #2095 in the Faith We Sing and join in prayerfully singing, “Star-Child.” Pay attention to the words, and the plea that this year, the day will arrive when Christmas comes to everyone, everyone alive! Notice the variety of conditions used to describe the child, and remember that each

one of us is a precious child of God – one to whom God comes in the ordinary and in the most unexpected ways.

ⁱ Kalas, J. Ellsworth. “Christmas Comes to a Back Fence” in Christmas From the Backside. Pp. 31-32

ⁱⁱ Moore, Christopher and Johnson, Pamela. Santa & Pete, p.111

ⁱⁱⁱ Provoking the Gospel of Luke, p.74

^{iv} McFee, Marcia. Sermon Fodder for “Calm and Bright” Worship Design Studio

^v Ibid

^{vi} Kalas, p.33

^{vii} Nouwen, Henri “Waiting for God” in Watch For the Light, p. 33-34

^{viii} Ibid, pp. 36-37

^{ix} Ibid