

The Space Between Weariness and Blessing

The Rev. Brandon C. Ashcraft

St. Paul's Episcopal Church (Cleveland, Ohio)

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Luke 1:39-45 / Canticle 15: 'The Song of Mary'

Exactly one year ago today, I moved to Cleveland to begin my ministry at St. Paul's. And as I often do at anniversaries, I've been taking stock of the last year and thinking back to where it started. In that spirit, I'm going to read you a short excerpt of an Advent reflection I wrote a year ago this week:

Along with people around the world, I recently watched as 90-year-old Margaret Keenan rolled up the sleeve of her 'Merry Christmas' T-shirt and received the first Covid-19 vaccine in the United Kingdom. The video footage showed Ms. Keenan being escorted away in a wheelchair as healthcare workers lined the hall and greeted her with enthusiastic applause. Their beaming smiles were visible through their plastic face shields, though I have to believe those smiles were tinged with tears – tears for the lives they had tried to save but could not. This is what Advent looks like to me. A refusal to deny suffering, alongside confident hope in the promise of deliverance.

This reflection feels as applicable today as it did a year ago. The suffering continues, even as we continue hoping for deliverance. The US this week surpassed 800,000 deaths from Covid-19, more than twice the 400,00 lives we tolled our bells for in January. The Cleveland Clinic this week saw its highest patient load since the beginning of the pandemic and the Governor DeWine just deployed the National Guard to address staffing shortages in hospitals across the state. And right here in our community, the virus is raging through our schools, causing anxiety for our families and upending holiday traditions once again. This all feels eerily and uncomfortably familiar. Maybe we haven't lost hope, *but we are certainly getting weary.*

The Rev. Pauli Murray once said that "hope is a song in a weary throat." And this morning we sang one of the most hopeful songs in all of scripture: the Song of Mary, the Magnificat. It is a hope-song in a weary throat if ever there was one. In the worshipping life of the church, it is the song of Evening Prayer and is sung in monasteries, cathedrals, and churches across the world each evening, just as darkness begins to set in. Mary's song rejoices in the goodness and power of God. It is a song about a God at work in a world full of struggle and pain. Mary sings about a God of justice who lifts up the lowly and feeds the hungry, while casting the mighty down from their thrones. So who is this Mary that gives us this incredible, sacred song? What do we know about her?

We've been conditioned by classic Christmas hymns to think of Mary as "meek and mild." But as one of our middle schoolers observed recently in Sunday School, there is nothing meek or mild about the Mary depicted in scripture – the one who is visited by an angel of the Lord named Gabriel. Angels in Christmas pageants might be cute, but angels in the Bible are terrifying...which is why the angel says to Mary, "Do

not be afraid.” Mary bravely consents to play her part in God’s plan: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord,” she says. “Let it be unto me according to your word.” As our Gospel for today begins, the angel Gabriel has just departed. Mary sets out “in haste” to visit her aged relative Elizabeth, who has miraculously conceived and is now six months into her own pregnancy with John the Baptist. From what we know about biblical geography, Mary’s journey to visit Elizabeth would have been a treacherous trip of some eighty miles through difficult terrain – hardly a journey for one who was ‘meek and mild.’ Elizabeth rejoices at Mary’s greeting and the baby leaps in her womb!

We should pause for a minute to consider this incredible scene. This is, after all, the very first community formed around Jesus – some even call it the first Christian worship service. We have Mary who is pregnant and unwed, a circumstance that could earn her social ostracization at best and stoning at worst. And Elizabeth, worn down by years of hopelessness at her inability to conceive a child, is now on the cusp of becoming a mother in the last season of her life. So much about their futures is uncertain. There are so many unanswered questions. But as one writer puts it, “Standing together on the precarious threshold of their own unknowing, Mary and Elizabeth find a way to sing God’s praises.”¹

Before Mary bursts into her song, Elizabeth offers her this benediction: “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” Those of us gathered here today feeling weary should ponder Elizabeth’s words: “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” In our culture, we most often think of someone as blessed if they have good fortune: “I am blessed to be in good health. I am blessed to have a good job,” etc. But Elizabeth’s words to Mary frame the concept of blessing very differently. Mary was blessed, not for what she had received, but because of her faith and trust in God. She was blessed for believing that God would keep his promises. She was blessed for believing that God could ‘look with favor’ on her lowliness and use an unwed teenage girl from a backwater town in Galilee to be the vessel of the world’s redemption.

Mary’s story teach us that a blessed life is not a life shielded from disappointment, pain and suffering. Mary endured plenty of that. The infant she laid against the wood of the manger would later be nailed to the wood of a cross. She would witness her beloved child’s painful death and abandonment. Anglican priest Tish Harrison Warren wrote this about Mary in a recent *New York Times* column: “[We] find in Mary’s story that joy and pain constantly intertwine. ... Mary was called by God, and her life reminds [us] that the vocations that God calls us to inevitably involve both joy and pain.”² In other words, the space between weariness and blessing is never as far as we might think. Indeed, it is often when we are at our weariest that we are most open to receive God’s grace. When the changes and chances of this life have brought us to our breaking point, this is where God can fashion us into a new creation. As Mary proclaims in her Magnificat, it is not from positions of power or strength that we meet God. No, the incredible paradox of the gospel is that we encounter God most profoundly in the weary, broken places of our life – when all that’s left to do is surrender to God’s mercy and put our faith and trust in his promise of deliverance. As we approach the end of Advent, with Christmas just across the horizon, so much remains uncertain for us, just as it did for Mary and Elizabeth. But what remains certain is this:

¹ Thomas, Debie. “At the Threshold,” *Journey with Jesus*. December 12, 2021. <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3260-at-the-threshold>

² Warrren, Tish Harrison. “What Mary Can Teach Us About the Joy and Pain of Life.” *The New York Times*, December 12, 2021.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God – the light the darkness cannot overcome – is coming into the world. On this threshold of our own unknowing, let us make ready our hearts to receive him. And like Mary, let us sing with confidence the praises of his name. *Blessed are we who believe that God will keep his promises.*
Amen.