

Blessed is she who believed

Luke 1:39-58

Rev. Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC in Camden; December 16, 2018

Prayer Song by Anne Quigley (verse 2):

There is a longing in our hearts, O God, for you to reveal yourself to us. There is a longing in our hearts for love we only find in you, O God. For justice, for freedom, for mercy, hear our prayer. In sorrow, in grief, be near, hear our prayer, O God.

This hymn by the English composer Anne Quigley is one of my favorites because it expresses the deep longing we have in our hearts that only God can fill. God is already in us by the power of the Holy Spirit and yet we lose touch with that presence. The story of the incarnation of God has the power to reconnect us with audacious intimacy and vulnerability with which God relates to us. More than any other liturgical time of the year, Advent consciously invites us to get in touch with this longing and to wait for a fulfillment that is beyond anything we can earn or merit. It comes to us.

The Dutch philosopher Coen Simon actually claims that waiting itself has the potential for great joy.¹ I imagine that there are many moments and days in our lives where this does not feel so, especially when we are dealing with illness. I think our young people would also agree that waiting can be a challenge for all sorts of reasons, especially in our culture of instant gratification and short attention spans. Yet, Simon claims that the very longing and waiting gives meaning to our lives as it puts us in touch with what is most precious to us. It seems that we do well to hold on to our longing, be it for connection, for belonging, for peace add your own words to mine in your heart.

Kathryn, our visiting artist, just shared about the wish to express something of the hidden unity in all that is and of the quality of vulnerability that is central to a life lived faithfully in the midst of the joys, struggles and contradictions of our very lives. I venture to say that her longing for this hidden unity is part of the fuel that enables her to create such beautiful art, partly in dialogue with Advent stories. These stories and Kathryn's images help to anchor us in a much bigger story than our own. Today, we heard how Gabriel announces to Mary that she will bear the healing power of God by the Holy Spirit. We heard of Mary's brave "yes" to God's invitation. We have heard of Mary meeting Elizabeth and singing her praise song to God. In all these, there is an underlying quality of joyous longing, risk taking, and expectancy.

¹ Christoph Pistorius, vice chair of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland in German, reflects on this in a blog post on the EKIR website (www.ekir.de)

As I pondered the texts, I was struck by what the difference might be between approaching life from an expectancy fueled by a vulnerable longing on the one hand and an attitude of set expectations often fueled by convention and our need to control on the other hand. Perhaps those of us who have had children may remember what it was like to anticipate the birth of your child. Yes, how lovely it can be to have dreams for your child and yet how often have you had to open your heart to who your child was becoming beyond your control? How many of you grew up struggling with shame because you felt you could not meet the many spoken and unspoken expectations of your family and society? Perhaps you are feeling similar pressures in your marriage, in your job, in your peer group at school or some other context. Let us look briefly at the encounter between Elizabeth and Mary as well as Mary's song (Magnifikat) for some wisdom on the difference between what I will call expectancy and expectation.

Neither Mary nor Elizabeth had expected to be pregnant - one of them was too young and unmarried, the other seemingly too old and "barren," which was a cause of deep shame for a woman in her society. As we heard, Mary and Elizabeth share their amazement and gratitude with each other. In the story, even the baby John (who will become the Baptist) is leaping in his mother's womb with excitement because Mary is now pregnant with Jesus, not because his mother has indigestion. And as the child leaps with joy, the spirit moves Elizabeth to proclaim that Mary is indeed carrying the child who will save/heal the world. Elizabeth exclaims, "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by God (Luke 1:45)." She is praising Mary for making a leap in her own right, for trusting that God would act decisively in and through her.

Mary responds with a song of praise. She feels so blessed by God's care for her and trust in her. She does not spell out what she now expects of God but praises God for all the amazing things God has already done, especially for those who have suffered greatly. Mary praises God's mercy and the ways God always finds ways to uphold covenants God has made. She just expresses her trust in God and her joy in being part of God's action in the world although she cannot know what exactly is to come. Of course, she may have hopes for how God will act through her child based on her longing and experience but we do not find Mary demanding anything of God. She does not say: "God, if you do this or that for me, then I will...."

Mary's response is not transactional but one born of inner transformation into a trusting relationship with the very source of her existence. Also keep in mind that bearing this child is completely unconventional. Mary puts

her very life at risk as a young, yet unmarried, woman living in a patriarchal culture that bases most social relationships on a rigid honor/shame system. If you bear a child out of wedlock, you bring shame on your family and can be killed or cast out. If her fiancé Joseph were not also moved to be in touch with his deepest longings and trusting in God beyond convention by the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary would hardly have a chance.

I wonder what it would be like for all of us to learn to receive each other with a spirit of trusting expectancy rather than with set expectations. Perhaps many of us are asking ourselves right now: “But don’t you have to have rules and clear expectations?” Perhaps the answer to that is “yes and.” If you recall Richard Rohr’s teachings on “falling upward,” we do all benefit, especially at a younger age, from learning what makes for life and what destroys it. But, at another level, rules or commandments, have the role of bringing us to our limit of recognizing how quickly we still make a mess of our lives. This was also Paul’s teaching (Romans 7:7-15). The law can give us information but the law by itself does not transform us.² If anything, it is our struggle born of learning that we cannot fully keep the law that brings us back to the mercy, grace and love of God who loves us beyond rigid expectations.

What would it be like for you, for me, for us, to truly trust that God welcomes us from a place of hopeful expectancy rather than expectation? As Rohr and Paul William Young, author of “The Shack” remind us, to the extent that we believe that God comes from a place of expectation, we actually live in fear of God and to the extent that we fear God, we are not free and do not know God.³ I believe that Jesus came in part to free us from this fear and invite us into a more joyous expectancy. Thanks to God, we are already part of a hidden unity which binds us together in God. So, as we now wait to welcome God in our midst as this vulnerable child, let us do so with the expectancy, freedom and joy Mary and Elizabeth can teach us. Let us pray:

There is a longing in our hearts, O God, for you to reveal yourself to us. There is a longing in our hearts for love we only find in you, O God. For wisdom, for courage, for comfort, hear our prayer. In weakness, in fear, be near, hear our prayer, O God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Richard Rohr in the audio *New Themes of Scripture*, St. Anthony Messenger Press, Ch. 8 or 9.

³ This is also at the heart of much of what William Paul Young brings across in his novel “The Shack.” More on this another time.