

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday when we look at the influence of Mary in our watching for the coming of the Christ Child. The narrative from Luke's gospel is one of the most beautiful and poetic passages in the bible, but it is also one of the most unusual. The voice and story of women are often left out of the biblical narratives, but in this passage we listen to an intimate conversation between two women who have been made outcast by society, and yet have been given honour by God. The spotlight shines on Mary and Elizabeth, two lowly and shamed ones through whom God has chosen to begin the transformation of the world.

But our insight into Mary and Elizabeth, doesn't start today in Luke's Gospel –rather in the reading we heard from Micah. Micah is one of the prophetic Hebrew texts which is used by the Gospel writers as a reference point – to help their readers understand who Jesus is. The section of the oracle we heard today vows that God's ancient covenant with Israel is secure and reliable, even if it may come about in an unexpected manner. The oracle provides assurance that God's covenant with David – will be fulfilled with a new leader in the line of David. Yet this new ruler will rise not from Jerusalem, the royal city, but from Bethlehem, a small village. He will not exercise military might like the Assyrians but will be one of peace who provides for his people as a shepherd. There are several allusions to Jesus in the image of this ruler, including his birthplace in Bethlehem, which was also the birthplace of David, and his pastoral image as shepherd, David's occupation¹. Given how well we know the story this might not sound alarming, or prophetic – but it is both – and builds on a consistent theme through the Bible that God delights in upsetting human expectations and challenging what we assume is just or noteworthy!

Part of our difficulty in unpacking Advent and Christmas is that it is so familiar, and we forget just how amazing and unsettling a story it is! Even Micah many centuries before is preparing the people for the way in which their expectations are going to be shattered. They, and we, will need to step out of our comfort zones to hear this story and to be changed by it.

And so it is, that Mary, having learned that she is pregnant by an angel rushes off to visit her cousin Elizabeth and share her news and her shame. Mary and Elizabeth were both women who understood shame – Elizabeth for being barren; Mary for being pregnant outside of marriage. Interestingly in the Quran version of the nativity – Mary runs away into the hills because of her shame to hide, until Jesus tells her it is safe. Yet despite their shame and their experience of their communities, they are both willing to hear what the spirit of God is telling them – that the babies which they are carrying will transform the world – and whatever the darkness that might feel like at this moment – the transformation – this hope is to be celebrated.

Sometimes however, it feels that our hope might be empty. On Thursday I was late to the Christmas Celebrations at Laurence's Larder, but in some ways, this was a

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2701

blessing, as it meant I was able to have two very powerful conversations with two amazing women. And because I was late, there was space for these conversations. The first woman lives in the aspiration of hope; living in chronic pain, estranged from her family who could not cope with the burden of her illness, she each week tells me of her prayer. Her prayer of hope that God is transforming her life. Every week I am inspired by her faith, and even when the pain is great, and her cry to God painful, though she may at times grow impatient with God and with her situation - I have never seen her loose hope .

The Second woman I spoke to for only the second time. She has lost all sense of hope. How is my life in this mess? How and when will anything change? Encouraging her to not give up, to hold on to hope seemed almost heartless; and yet once she had eaten something warm and had someone - anyone listen to her pain - hope seemed a little possible.

These conversations, so painful, of women isolated and almost despairing seemed so out of place in our affluent city; and yet they reminded me of one of the most wonderful lines from the book and movie trilogy the Hunger Games, when President Snow - the benevolent Dictator says *'Hope. It is the only thing stronger than fear. A little hope is effective. A lot of hope is dangerous².'*

Hope is dangerous, it can lead us to believe that things might change. It can hold us when all else around us seems impossible. But hope is something that is very difficult to hold onto alone. It is why places like Laurence's Larder are so important - you do not have to face your pain alone.

Mary and Elizabeth have a dangerous amount of Hope - so much hope in fact that it is faith!

Elizabeth's greeting to Mary is both a prophesy and a blessing. By declaring both Mary and the fruit of Mary's womb "blessed" she begins a series of blessings that weave through Luke's birth narrative and intensify its tone of joy, delight, and praise. Mary, Zechariah, and Simeon will all add their blessings to the chain, praising God for what God is doing at this moment in history. Mary is blessed because despite all expectations her social status has been reversed: she will be honoured rather than shamed for bearing this child. But she has also been blessed with divine joy -- with beatitude -- because she has believed that God is able to do what God promises to do.³ She held hope in God in all circumstance.

In her blessing, or song, Elizabeth also expresses her own understanding from her own experience of being shamed and excluded. She had endured a lifetime of being treated as a failure. Her response to her miraculous pregnancy emphasizes that God's grace has reversed her social status: "This is what the Lord has done for me

² <http://m.imdb.com/title/tt1392170/quotes?qt=qt1666897>

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2723

when he looked favourably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people" (Luke 1:25). At long last, in her old age, she is an honourable married woman, pregnant with her husband's son.

Elizabeth continues the pattern of social reversal by opening her arms and her home to a relative whom her neighbours would expect her to reject. Instead of shaming Mary, she honours her. When Elizabeth welcomes Mary, she practices the same kind of inclusive love that Jesus will show to prostitutes and sinners. She sees beyond the shameful situation of Mary to the reality of God's love at work among those whom society rejects and excludes.

Elizabeth's words and actions invite us to reflect on our own openness to the ways that God chooses to act in our world. What is God doing and prompting in us, and in our community now. What situations that feel shameful are actually pointing us to God at work? Are we listening to what God is calling us to?

Or like Mary - when our situation seems hopeless - when we feel that we should despair - are we able to see the potential of what God is doing within us. For Mary it was to carry Jesus - God is at work in each of us if only we choose to see it. To what situations are we called to bring a dangerous level of hope?

There are many situations which confront us this Christmas tide the ongoing despair of the situation in Syria, Yemen, The Congo, Bangladesh, West Papua and more and more each day seem to emerge - where justice seems a long way away for communities, individuals and nations. But in reality, we do not even have to leave our own community to realise the immensity of despair for many - families and individuals who have little or no food this Christmas, those with inadequate heating or housing. And yet in the next few days we will celebrate the birth of hope - dangerous hope - that we believe if embraced can transform our world.

Tyler Knott Gregson⁴, a young American poet and blogger phrases it this way '

I do not believe
there is a more dangerous
and destructive force
in all the world
than Hope,
but I do not believe
there is a more necessary
or perfectly beautiful one
either

⁴ <http://tylerknott.com/>

4th Sunday of Advent- 23rd December 2018
Micah 5: 2-5a; Hebrews 10: 5-10 and Luke 1: 39-45 (46-55)

As Advent draws to a close, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas tomorrow, we are invited to be like Mary and Elizabeth – to step beyond what we think is the story, and look at what God is doing within us. To leave aside the shame and turn instead to dangerously hope- to sing out to God in praise of what is possible. May this be our pray as we come to kneel at the crib later tomorrow. Amen.