

Reflection: Dreaming Together Advent 2, 2009

Mary really needed a friend. She was pregnant and unmarried, in a society where that could mean summary execution. Her betrothed husband was not happy about the news, and she needed time away – time with someone who would not suspect her, or judge her - someone with whom she could feel safe. So she packed up her few things and began the long, weary road to her cousin's home. She was taking a chance on Elizabeth: after all, Elizabeth was the wife of a priest, and her husband Zechariah probably wouldn't take too kindly to Mary's "interesting condition".

I imagine Mary must have felt some trepidation as she turned the corner and walked up the dusty path to her cousin's house. But her fears were unfounded, and her hopes fulfilled, when she was greeted with joy by her cousin – a cousin who also had an unexpected pregnancy and an unusual tale to tell. These two women, far apart in age, found in each other a safe place to tell their stories of an encounter with the holy – of how God had broken into their lives in a profound and unsettling way. They were able to share their hopes and their fears for their unborn children. It must have been with a full heart that Mary sang the words inspired by another woman – a woman who had given birth to a child when all hope had gone, a woman whose child became the first prophet and judge of Israel.

Mary's song is full of hope for something new, something radically different from the oppressive world she lived in. She sang of justice, of human dignity, of a radical reversal in which the proud and rich would change places with the poor underclass. She sang of mercy and compassion, and of a world in which a faithful and just order would prevail. She sang of that hope for her child and Elizabeth's, and both she and Elizabeth believed that their children would be a part of bringing this new world into being. What a joyful hope – a joy that was increased by having someone with whom to share it.

A spiritual director once told me that when there is a need, God will send us a friend – a friend who will remind us of the hope we have in Jesus, of the peace which we know in his presence, of the future that can be ours when we follow him. In such a friend, we may see the face of God, and know God's love concretely. There's a song I remember from my days of listening to contemporary Christian music, recorded by Amy Grant and Sandi Patty – both women who went through a rough time when their marriages landed on the rocks and the conservative evangelical world judged them without mercy. They were not looking to each other for friendship – indeed, in some senses they were rivals for a limited market share. But God sent them each other. These are the words of the song:

When the dark closes in so hard
I can hardly see
And the walls of my fortress of faith
Crumble in on me

when it seems like the end
not a measure of strength to spend
I feel the arms of a stranger rescue me

Chorus

With some unexpected friends
Never asking where I have been
Just a hand of mercy and words of love
Call me back again
Oh, it feels like home
With unexpected friends

A soothing balm for the wounds
I suffer along the way
A fervent prayer giving courage
And hope for another day
Through the help of my friends

Ones I may never see again
Seems like angels that were
sent by heaven for me

Bob Farrell, Greg Nelson

Mary had an encounter with a heavenly angel – a messenger of God; but it seems she needed an encounter with an earthly angel – another messenger of God – to really bring her joy alive and reassure her that the vision she had for a future with God was a vision that was shared.

Many of us in the church get tired. We get tired working for something beyond what we see, something that calls to us from a future that yet might be. The people I know who work for peace, who struggle for justice, who live with a longing for a life in which oppression and violence and carelessness and inequality and hate no longer have the power to hurt and harm – well, they get discouraged, and burnt-out, and begin to think that there really is no hope, and that no peace can ever be found. That's when we need those friends: unexpected angels who remind us of the hope that is in us, the grace and mercy of God, the faithfulness of the one who made us and created us to shine.

My prayer for each of you - when your heart begins to quail at what you see in the present, and when the future feels like more of a nightmare than anything else - my prayer is that your unexpected friend will find you, and help you to renew the dreams you carry in your hearts. Our vision of the future profoundly shapes our present: the prophets of old knew that, and so did Mary and Elizabeth. May we dream dreams of justice, dreams of dignity, dreams of peace – and may Jesus our Friend, working in and through us and others, bring these dreams to be. Amen.