

Mary and Elizabeth: A Collision of Joys

Luke 1:26-45 by Patty Friesen (Second Advent, Dec.6/15)

This pregnant Mary created by Robin Neudorf, lives in her garden during the spring, summer and fall and is happy to join her garden statue friend Elizabeth in church today to illustrate how Mary joined Elizabeth today in scripture in Elizabeth's house and Elizabeth's child John leapt in her womb with joy. When the angel Gabriel announced her pregnancy Mary responded just like Zechariah did last week with, "How can this be?" And once again Gabriel has to remind her that nothing is impossible with God. Elizabeth's pregnancy is a blessing because it is so wholly unexpected and she's been waiting for it and it restores her to social acceptance. For Mary, pregnancy is a disaster, only degrading her further into social rejection and poverty. And yet these two women meet with joyful encounter in today's scripture, the young and the old, the virgin and the infertile.

This moment of Mary and Elizabeth's meeting has been called The Visitation by Renaissance artists and has been reflected on by spiritual commentators. Their inner resonance and the shared recognition of God's work within them, has been called a collision of joys by seventeenth century theologian Jeremy Taylor. A collision of joys. What a delightfully worded phrase to express the feeling of the visitation of two hearts that carry God to one another. For there is a secret communion between women who literally hold new life within them – a collision of joys that transcends race, creed, age or background. Women ripe with baby know it in the shortness of their breath, the weight of their bodies and the increased coursing of their blood.

It was unusual for Renaissance artists to depict a pregnant Mary. It was too scandalous or intimate to paint pregnant women. Traditional artists only painted a pregnant Mary in relation to the pregnant Elizabeth. Modern women are more likely to photograph their pregnant bellies as an object of beauty. My friend had a body cast made in her ninth month and it hangs out in her basement to the fascination of her daughter and freaks out family friends who happen upon it.

Writer Wendy Wright says Advent is a wonderful time of year to be pregnant. All three of her pregnancies were during Advent and the waiting of pregnancy is most like the waiting that we do during Advent. The waiting of pregnancy is like the waiting we do for God. We carry hidden within ourselves new life. Not simply in the sense of renewal but new life particularized, personalized and uniquely en-fleshed. Like an unborn child, the life of God grows unseen yet profoundly felt. Insistently pushing and prodding us, enlarging the contours of our lives and our hearts, as intimate to us as our own breathing, yet utterly other, the divine presence waits to be born. (Vigil, p. 32)

As I wrote this, our pregnant friend Pastor Emily Toews from Drake's blood pressure went up and she thought her baby would have to come out too early by C-section at 29 weeks. Hooked up to the baby's heart monitor and drugged up on magnesium, she waited for days for baby Toews Miller to come. It was an anxious and stressful time. She didn't have time to prepare emotionally for this baby but had to do so quickly and deeply during those days in hospital. Ideally we have nine months to prepare, to dream up names and read to baby and bond with them in vitro. We prepare ourselves physically by painting a room and finding a crib and car seat and onesies and going to birth classes and touring RUH's birthing centre.

In the same way, the church year gives us 4 weeks during Advent, to prepare ourselves spiritually for Christmas. Advent was traditionally a time of repentance and fasting like Lent but I never hear of anyone giving up something for Advent. Advent is for piling on more Christmas concerts and banquets and presents. Repentance? What might that mean in this sensory overloaded, celebratory season? It may mean stopping for a while to sit and meditate in a candle lit room while listening to The Messiah. Repentance might mean that not doing must also be part of our preparation. We must look closely at our lives as they are, marking where they are God-directed or not. Then we must begin to make the slow and ever-necessary turning around to place our feet firmly on the straight path that will lead us into the arms of our waiting God.

The scriptural imagery of the season is clear. God is coming to us. But in order for that truly to happen, we must go as well to God. The highway runs in two directions. The invitation is for the divine and human to meet halfway. At that meeting place the deep mystery of the season comes into being.

Some of us may assume that repentance is about actions – not yelling at our kids or spouse. Others may assume that repentance is about attitudes – letting go of resentments towards bossy siblings or difficult co-workers. Repentance of course, is both action and attitude, inner and outer dimensions and involves our willingness to reflect on those actions and attitudes that habitually shape our lives in ways that we are often not even aware of.

Repentance is not listening to that horrible little voice within that keeps whispering that we are no good and that everything bad is our own fault. True repentance begins with the felt knowledge that we are loved by God. We are children of

God and are called to live into that freedom and confidence. What hinders us from that confidence and freedom of knowing we are beloved? Repentance is not flagellating ourselves over our failures but courageously and painstakingly reorienting our passions, unlearning old patterns, turning our faces, like the sunflower to the dawning of the light of God. (Vigil, p. 39-42)

The promises we anticipate during Advent are promises that the world as we know it will be overturned. Our repentance is but the lived recognition that things are overturned and we joyously participate in the reign of death and sorrow that at present envelop us, as individuals, as nations and as the global community. The seventh chapter of Luke tells of John the Baptist sending several disciples to Jesus to ask him if indeed he is the promised one to come. In reply, Jesus points to the reversal dynamic inherent in the reign of God, which he inaugurates by healing many. Jesus turns to John's disciples and says, "Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the Good news is proclaimed to the poor."

In their visitation, Mary and Elizabeth praise God as their Saviour. Their confession of Saviour expresses the desperate need of the lowly, the poor, the oppressed and the hungry. Those who have power and means, privilege and position has no need to voice such a term that is a plea for help. Saviour gives evidence of one's sense of need greater than one's own strength. Mary and Elizabeth give theological clarity on who God is. God is our Saviour. All that Jesus does by calling for repentance, forgiving sinners, healing the sick, casting our demons, eating with outcasts and self-sacrificing, he does according to God's purpose and intent. In Jesus, the role of God as our Saviour is

transparent. To confess with Mary and Elizabeth that God is our Saviour means that we will not look to some other power for salvation from the chaos we have created. Neither technology nor social progress, neither education nor legislated reforms will deliver us. God may use any of these processes, but the basis of our trust, hope and commitment is in God our Saviour. (Interpreters, p. 56)

Our spiritual preparations, our repentance brings such reversals in ourselves and in our world. As humankind, we wait with all creation for this redemption and worship as we wait. Let us pray...