

Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 20, 2015
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Being a womb for Christ

“O come to us abide in us our Lord, Emmanuel.” Amen.

Even if you are not a football enthusiast you may remember the headlines just after Thanksgiving of 1984, shouting “Miracle in Miami!” There were six seconds left in the Orange Bowl and Boston College was going to lose to the defending National champions, the Miami Hurricanes. Spectators in the stands had already begun to pack up their belongings, leaving the stadium, knowing the outcome. But the game was not over. Doug Flutie, the quarterback of the Boston College Eagles dropped back and threw the pass of his lifetime to win the game for the underdog team. Even now, I can recall the shouts of the commentators and the jubilation of the unlikely victors. They called it a “Hail Mary Pass,” the team without hope that took a risk and found their miracle of the moment. That phrase “Hail Mary” pass is often spoken without thought to its reference, that young woman, a little girl really, who in the face of her fear risked everything to become a dwelling place for God.

Today we spend one last waiting breath with Mary, the mother of Jesus, who with courage and consent became the bearer of hope for all. This passage from the gospel of Luke begins just after Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel, when she learned that she would carry the Son of God. Mary’s faithful response was “Here am I, let it be with me according to your word.” With little hesitation she made room in her heart for God’s miracle.

Imagine the vulnerability of this young girl and the trouble she would face. Mary lived in a time when age and gender placed her among the lowly and being an unwed mother could bring a death sentence. What paradox is found in God’s choice of Mary, not a person of privilege or power, but an ordinary girl! Only about 13, she held God’s promise for the world in her womb.

In our story today, Mary set out in haste, to a Judean town to visit her cousin Elizabeth, also with child despite her advanced age. Elizabeth was to bear a son, whom we know as John the Baptist. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth’s child leaped for joy in her womb at Mary’s greeting. She proclaimed a blessing upon Mary, for her profound faith. Mary found nurturance in the words of someone who loved her. Two vulnerable women shared an intimate exchange that brought healing and strength. Being with one another gave Mary courage to face whatever was in store.

In response, Mary sang bold words of praise and promise, for a God who would favor the lowly. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for He has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.” Her canticle known as the *Magnificat*, held a prophetic message. She proclaimed that an age was at hand where hierarchies would be subverted and the downtrodden lifted up. Mary embodied that very message; the power of the living God within would be the Savior of the world.

The words of this song have been used throughout generations to bring hope to the suffering and to offer thanksgiving for a God who creates new life. While women had little power in a patriarchal society, they held the gift of life in their very bodies. Mary and Elizabeth were part of

God's plan. Elizabeth would bear a prophet of the coming Messiah. Mary would birth the savior of the world.

Today we struggle to imagine encounters with angels, divine involvement and holy callings. Science and technology leave little room to believe in miracles. Our profound skepticism contributes to a culture of indifference and diminishing hope. We often miss the face of Christ in the stranger and may not even recognize the mystery unfolding as Christ is conceived in our hearts.

So this visitation story can be packed up for another year with little difference to our lives or we can ponder its purpose for each of us. We look to Mary and Elizabeth to discover how we, too, can be bearers of God. How do we create that dwelling place within, where Christ's love can grow and flourish? It means offering ourselves to God, making space in our lives for God to abide, and being willing to bring God's love to the world. Will we simply humor the church and its stories or suspend our reserve and risk claiming this narrative as our own?

Loretta Ross Gotta, a modern contemplative and pastor wrote about "being a womb." I was intrigued with this imagery that envisions within each of us, male or female, a hospitable place to nurture Christ's love. Gotta writes, "What matters is relationship, the 'being with.' We create holy ground and give birth to Christ in our time by believing in, and loving the mysterious infinite one who stirs within." Like Mary, as we dwell with God, hope lives in us.

It seems to me that we have lost sight of being and particularly "being with" as our culture has become so much about doing. Especially in these troubled times, we may feel helpless to do anything. This is the time we must be with one another and be with God. To be human though is to live with fears of loss, of change, of losing control. When we nurture and grow those fears instead of God's promises, we forget what is possible with God. We are given a holy calling to bring flesh to God's hope and love in the world, being with those who have lost hope. Is there a person in your life that needs this "being with?" Someone is waiting for your visitation to bring them the gift of hope. Perhaps that will be their miracle.

Advent is not just a season for God to come to us, but for us to come to God. We can make every day a holy day as we make room for Christ to dwell within. Each time we bear God's presence in the world, Christ is born anew. So don't leave the stadium yet my friends, because the game is not over. Watch and see the Christ light come into a dark world and live in to your participation in God's work. Drop back from your own priorities and risk conceiving of God's miracle in your life. I pray that we can be prophets of hope, wombs for Christ's love to grow, and bearers of God's promises to others. Then surely we can proclaim, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior!" Amen.