

The Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 20, 2015

"MIDWIVES"

by Mary Anne Biggs

Hebrews 10:5-10 ~ Luke 1:39-55

John and I have always had two distinct parenting styles. I considered him the brakeman on the locomotive lives of our children. While I was the one who usually responded, "Well, I don't see why not," John's response was more likely to be "No, I won't even consider it." While I never wanted to be the one to crush their dreams, John was the one who kept our household relatively sane and our children alive. Thanks to me, our son raised 25 chickens for 4H when he was in kindergarten ... thanks to John he didn't raise sheep the next year. And truth be told, I was the one out there in the coop for 6 weeks, feeding, watering and mucking, but that's a story for another time. Well, I guess that's what dads do. Or maybe that's what adults do. I find myself doing it more and more as a pastor. But deep in my heart I still want to be more like Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, in the story Luke tells us today.

Luke has a feminine side in the way he tells the story. His Nativity is an Impressionist painting ... a PBS production. Luke gives us Mary's point of view. It's beautiful. It's poignant. It's musical. Matthew makes you dig out the maps, plot the stars, look over the lists of rulers. Luke leaves you humming. He sets the stage in vivid scenes from the Temple to the manger. Angels fly here and there making announcements. People keep breaking out in song. Everybody speaks in poetry, like one of Shakespeare's dramas. Then at that magical, climactic moment of Jesus' birth, the heavens open and the celestial choir sings the "Gloria." It's very dramatic ... very Hollywood. But in the flow of his wonderful musical, Luke gives us this exquisite moment between two women.

It's one of those scenes in front of the curtains while they're resetting everything backstage, the only prop a door. Knock! Knock! Knock! The door swings open. Their eyes meet, two women who are both, for the first time, mothers-to-be ... their bodies changing, their lives changing, pregnant in all senses of the word, physical and emotional and spiritual ... expectant, future focused, waiting for the birth of something new ... the birth that will make *all things new*.

I love this scene and this moment, but it gives me pause. I feel a little embarrassed that Luke even shows us this scene. It's so personal, so intimate, I'm not sure we ought to be here. You know, like when you see two lovers kissing goodbye at the airport, or a young mother nursing her child, or a family gathered around a fresh grave under the tent at the cemetery to say goodbye ... the polite thing to do is look away, respect their privacy, leave them alone. Still, you steal a quick look because the deeply human moment is so fascinating and beautiful and touching. That's the kind of scene Luke shows us. It's very brief, just a peek. Luke won't stay here long. It's just a glimpse ... just a glance ... just enough to show us how it went and why it was so important.

Luke has prepared us for this meeting in his two previous scenes. In scene one he shows us the old priest Zechariah, childless and disappointed ... he's praying when one of those "fear not" angels appears to him. "I'm Gabriel!" the angel says, and then tells him that their prayers have finally been heard, they've got a baby on the way. "Well shut my mouth!" Zechariah says, and so it was.

Elizabeth goes into seclusion. Maybe she doesn't want to listen to the jokes about her age ... or maybe she's just not taking any chances with something going wrong ... or maybe she has her hands full taking care of her pregnancy and her hushed husband all at the same time. Since women were always blamed for infertility in those days, Elizabeth's shame of many years is now removed. But Mary's shame has just begun when she has to leave Bethlehem because nobody believes her preposterous story that Gabriel appeared to her and told her she had conceived by a miracle of God ... that she was bearing - the Messiah!

Scene two takes place at Mary's home in Nazareth. Gabriel appears again to tell her what God has planned for her. Dramatic pause. "Okay, I'll do it," she says, only much more poetically, "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.*" Like she has a choice, which is the whole point ... apparently, she does. Still, who's going to believe this story? We all know what people are going to say. So she skedaddles from Bethlehem, or as Luke puts it, "went with haste" to visit her cousin down south in Judea. Convenient excuse ... cousin's pregnant ... needs Mary's help. We see Mary stealing through the room where Gabriel broke the news. She's carrying her nap sack and looking over her shoulder. Curtain closes. Mary strolls across from stage left. Knock! Knock! Knock! The door opens. Their eyes meet. It's a pregnant moment.

We Protestants don't talk much about Mary. But she has been called "the first true disciple," "the ransom of Eve's tears," "mother of our salvation," "mother of God". William Wordsworth called Mary "our tainted nature's solitary boast." We don't need to worship her, but surely we ought to praise her, because when her moment of truth comes, Mary doesn't do the smart thing. She doesn't do the sensible thing. She doesn't do the selfish thing. She just does the right thing. As Madeline L'Engle puts it:

*This is the irrational season ... When love blooms bright and wild.
Had Mary been filled with reason ... There had been no room for the child!*

Well, maybe we can't be as trusting and faithful as Mary, but consider Elizabeth, and her critical role in Luke's Nativity pageant. Finally! Vindicated! She's savoring every moment, worrying with each kick, taking care of her silenced husband. Then up pops her young cousin, Mary, barely beyond puberty, but already pregnant, and not married ... but preceded by her story that her son-to-be is the Messiah everybody's been awaiting for centuries. I imagine that Mary's mother, cousin Elizabeth's aunt, has asked her niece to talk some sense into her teenage daughter. I imagine Elizabeth has ideas about her own son and how important he will be because Elizabeth got angel news about her baby, too. Mary stands at Elizabeth's door. And here's the big moment ... the two women meet. It *is* a pregnant moment, isn't it? Some of us might imagine Elizabeth saying to Mary, "What's this business about you bearing the Messiah? How likely is that? You're from Nazareth, honey! Itty-bitty, podunk Nazareth! What were you thinking?"

What were you drinking? You're not even married. You better hold on to that Joseph fella. And you better keep quiet about your boy "King of Kings" around here. I've got my own baby on the way, so don't be bragging that your boy is "special." That is what some would say. It's only human. Somebody's got to talk some sense into this girl. She's got a tough road ahead and she needs to deal with it!

But this is what Elizabeth says, (or maybe sings!):

*"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.
And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?
For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And
blessed is she who believed there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord"*
(Luke 1:42-45).

It's so beautiful, and it's just the opposite of what we might be expecting. We expect challenge, criticism, common sense. Mary probably does, too. But Elizabeth offers blessing and blessing and blessing. Luke says she is filled with the Holy Spirit before she opens her mouth. How does he know? Well, that's the sign that the Spirit of God is around, isn't it? Blessing and blessing and blessing?

You know what happens next? Mary starts singing!

*"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for (God) has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their
hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has
filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his
servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants
forever"* (Luke 1:47-55).

It is the *Magnificat*, and it is the most magnificent psalm of triumph in the entire Bible. You read the *Magnificat* by itself and marvel ... little Mary ... so young ... so small ... so vulnerable. Suddenly out of her mouth comes this big, rich aria about God's triumph, and the apocalyptic reversal of fortune ... how the poor are lifted up and the rich sent empty away ... how thrones and dominions will fall but the disenfranchised will rule. Where in the world does this girl get her indomitable spirit, her confidence and faith, her radical social ideas and bold theological pronouncements?

She gets it from Elizabeth. Because Elizabeth ... in that critical moment when success or failure hangs in the balance ... and might be decided by just a little bit ... weighs in with blessing and encouragement and belief. Elizabeth confirms what Mary holds for now as a fragile hope.

Elizabeth encourages Mary's flickering light. Elizabeth believes in Mary so that Mary can believe in herself because we all need somebody to believe in us ... to confirm our best dreams ... to blow on the spark that might just kindle into our inner flame.

That's why Luke shows us this moment, isn't it? Mary, still pondering what Gabriel told her ... she has acquiesced to the will of God, but as we all know, birth is a process, not a moment ... and Mary has had time for the backflow of doubt and confusion to wash across the first wave of euphoria that had followed the angel's announcement. It isn't automatic. It isn't a done deal. Mary needs somebody to help her get through this. Where are her parents? What is Joseph doing? Elizabeth is the first person in the story to bless Mary and believe in her. Now Mary can accept God's blessing for herself and believe it is true. I think Luke wants us to know that Elizabeth is the midwife of our salvation. I think Luke wants us to ask ... what is coming to birth of God's Spirit in those around us which we need to bless ... and encourage ... and believe in so that we can be the midwives of God's salvation, too?

I know somebody's got to have some common sense. Somebody's got to ask, "What's that gonna cost and how are we gonna pay for it and where's the money gonna come from?" But I want to think somewhere, sometime, I might just have the opportunity that Elizabeth had ... maybe you will too ... to have some young, naïve, and foolish Mary, come and tell me a crazy story and share an impossible dream ... and that in that moment I won't say, "Well, yes, but." I want to hope that maybe in that fragile, exquisite, pregnant moment, I will be filled with the Spirit and say, "Mary! You go, girl! Blessed are you among women because God has picked you for this task!" And because I do, that Mary will bring forth something beautiful for all of us to share beyond anything we ever dreamed. I think, maybe that's what the church is supposed to be doing. Blessing, blessing, and blessing ... encouraging one another ... believing in each other and bringing God's best dreams to birth one by one by one as midwives of God's creation. What do you think? Is that something we might do? It's almost Christmas. It's a pregnant moment, isn't it? May we pray?

Living God, you are the possibility of every moment, the potential of every person, the promise of every hope. You give us good dreams of a better world, of peace, hope, joy, and love. Teach us to be like Mary, submitting to your will. Fill us with your Spirit and let your dreams come true in us. But teach us also to be like Elizabeth.

Fill us with your Spirit to see what is possible in the souls around us, to bless and encourage and believe so that we might assist in the new beginnings you are bringing to birth in all your children. Turn our "Yes, but" into "Yes, Lord!" and be God with us and for us and among us and in us through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.