

Nothing Is Impossible

Luke 1:39-55

Paul's favorite term for the church is the "body of Christ." The church is where the Word made flesh again takes on flesh, our flesh; again becomes a living, breathing reality within this world.

For many, it's this incarnate, human quality of the church that is a difficult aspect of the church that they just can't stand. They are all for a faith that is "spiritual" but they just don't like the fleshy form (the church) that Christ has taken in the world.

For those of us who believe in the truth of the incarnation, we believe that the fleshy quality of the church is part of our salvation, a way God gets to us in this world, in this life.

In today's Gospel, as we stand on the threshold of the Nativity, two pregnant women are featured, Elizabeth and Mary, "great with child" as the Bible puts it. We realize here that the incarnation – God in the flesh – doesn't come to us pretty and perfect as in a Christmas card.

Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah were an elderly couple, long past the age of child bearing. They had long ago given up the hope of ever having a child. Then suddenly, Zechariah, who was a priest, received the news from a messenger of God that Elizabeth would bear a son, whom they would call John. Their son would be dedicated to God's service, and would go to the people, "*in the spirit and power of Elijah... to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.*" Zechariah was so shocked by the news that he was stricken mute, in order that he might be given time to consider the implications of this revelation. (Luke 1:8-23) Thus was foretold the birth of John the Baptist.

The story of the birth of John the Baptist to an elderly couple isn't really so unusual in the history of Israel. It is part of a long tradition of God granting new life to the old. The first such instance is way back near the beginning of the story of God's people.

One of my favorite stories from Genesis is Sarah's reaction when she heard God telling Abraham of God's plan to give to them a son. Do you remember what Sarah did? She laughed! She couldn't even begin to believe this word that God had given. She laughed, but she did have a son in her old age. Her son Isaac was the father of Jacob, the founder of the nation Israel. (Gen. 18:9-15; 21:1-3) So Elizabeth stands in the tradition of Sarah.

Manoah was an old man, whose wife had never been able to conceive. His prayer was answered, and at an advanced age, that couple had a son. The son's name was Samson. Elizabeth stands also with the unnamed mother of Samson.

Hannah was an older woman, who prayed to God for a son. She prayed in the Temple after a festival. She prayed so loudly and emotionally that the priest Eli thought she was drunk. When her petition was granted, she dedicated her son to God's service, just as she had promised. Hannah prayed a

prayer of thanksgiving, saying, *"My heart exults in the Lord..."* Hannah's prayer became a psalm of thanksgiving for the nation. (1 Sam. 2:1-10)

Hannah's son was Samuel, one of the greatest of the early leaders of Israel, and the one who prepared the way for David to rule as the great King of Israel. The stories of Hannah and Elizabeth are strikingly similar.

And so the tradition of God granting a son to the elderly childless couple is long established in the faith of Israel: Abraham and Sarah were given Isaac, Manoah and his wife were given Samson, Hannah and her husband were given Samuel. Each of these babies became men who were important in the history and religion of Israel. In this tradition of God blessing the barren, Zechariah and Elizabeth are given John. It is in the context of this tradition that John the Baptist belongs.

As Luke develops the birth narrative of Jesus, Mary, the young virgin, has received news that she will bear a child. Elizabeth, her older relative, likewise has received the news that she too will conceive and bear a son. Now the two, the young and the old, come together, as Mary visits Elizabeth.

It must have been quite a time for the two, Elizabeth and Mary, each alone with doubts and fear. Elizabeth had longed for a child down through the years but was well past the age when there could be any hope. Then, her husband struck mute through an angel's vision in the Temple, and Elizabeth must have felt strange, getting heavier and heavier with child, at her age. But at least she was married. For Mary it was so much worse. Unmarried and pregnant. The Law in ancient Israel permitted that a woman might be stoned to death under these conditions. The angel says to Mary, *"do not be afraid,"* for Mary has all kinds of reasons to be filled with fear. Between the angels and the visions and wondering how to communicate with the men in their lives, how to present their conditions to the public at large, it must have been an incredible relief for them to come together, to be with one another, to shore up one another, encourage one another, and recognize in their companionship that God is indeed with them.

As the two greet one another, Luke tells us of Elizabeth that, *"the babe leaped in her womb"*. Here was John the Baptist already fulfilling his mission of announcing the presence of the Christ. As the two women greet one another, the reader can easily scan the page and see what should be about to happen. Just as Hannah sang a psalm of thanksgiving for her blessing in her old age, so too can we expect Elizabeth to do the same.

A song of thanksgiving is sung. *"My soul magnifies the Lord..."* it begins. But the song is not a song of Elizabeth, but of Mary. This is a strange twist because Biblical tradition demands that Elizabeth sing this song of praise. Tradition demands that the older woman, who has long given up hope of having children, should sing this psalm of praise, in the tradition of Hannah, as well as of Samson's mother and of Sarah. But Luke tells us, *"Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord.'"*

Luke telling us that Mary has sung this psalm of thanksgiving is a sign to the reader that something is radically different here. For Luke to give us Mary's song here is a signal that an old tradition is being interrupted, that God is doing something unprecedented. If Elizabeth had sung Hannah's song, it

could be said that God was continuing the tradition of being gracious to the old and barren. But when the young virgin Mary sings, it must be said that God's grace is not as of old, but is new and strange and different.

Today, if something that radical happened in the church, our response most likely would be, "But we've never done it this way before." Fortunately, this isn't our doing. Here God is doing a new thing. This child of Mary's will not be as Isaac, or as Samuel, or Samson, or even as John. This child will be called the Son of God.

The Son of God. The long-awaited Messiah. The One that was expected to come in power, leading mighty armies to overthrow the Roman oppressors. The alpha and the omega. The One who was in the beginning with God, who was God. God Incarnate.

But wait! This one comes as a baby! What could be more helpless and dependent than a new-born infant? God Incarnate comes into this world as a baby! What could be more different than what was expected? A babe in swaddling clothes. But that's really archaic language, Biblical language. What we're really talking about here is God in a diaper. God who got hungry, like us. God who would need to rest, like us. God who needed his mother's love and care. Not at all what was expected. When Mary sings her psalm of praise, she alerts us that God's grace is indeed new, and exciting, and sometimes far beyond our understanding.

So when Mary sings the psalm, it sounds new and strange, startling us to attention. It's not at all what we expected. And what is it that Mary sings? Her song opens with joy and praise that God has favored her, a handmaiden of low estate. But only briefly does she sing of herself. She sees God's grace toward her as but a single instance of the way of God in the world.

This song that Mary sings is a song of justice, God's justice. Mary's song sings of a day when the existing order will be turned upside down; when the old world order will be shaken to the core and a new one established.

But it's clearly not a song of praise for the middle class. Neither Mary nor her son ever speaks of a preferential option for the rich. It's a song about God's care and concern for the poorest, the most oppressed, for the have-nots of this world. Mary sings of a world that her son will one day preach about when he says, "*Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you that hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh.*" (Luke 6:20-22)

Mary sings of how God has scattered the proud and the mighty, and has exalted those who are oppressed. God has fed the hungry and raised up the poor.

But Mary speaks of these things as if they have already happened. The last time I saw a news report, the poor were still being oppressed; the rich and powerful were still very firmly in control; there are still untold millions of hungry and homeless people in the world. Some of them right here in Fairfield. Why then, did Mary sing her psalm of thanksgiving in the past tense? Why does she speak as if these

things have already been accomplished, when we know better? Are we reading here a work of fiction?

Of course, the conditions she describes are not yet, but one of the ways the faithful express trust in God is to speak of the future with such confidence that it is described as already here. Such faith is a prerequisite to being a participant in efforts to achieve that future. To celebrate the future as a memory, to praise God for having already done what is still before us to do: this is the way of the people of God. Without this song of praise, our noblest efforts to achieve justice in society become arrogant projects, nothing more than our attempts to impose our will on others. Without this song of praise, our efforts at ministry can become nothing more than self-serving works, misguided attempts to earn God's favor.

Mary's song, this strange and exciting song of praise, sings of the joy with which we receive God in the flesh into our world. This psalm of thanksgiving for things which are yet to come is our song, the song of the church. It must always be our song. It sings of the day when all will be made right in the world. It sings of the day to which we look and work, the day which we celebrate, when God's justice rules. With Mary, we sing through the ages, "*My soul magnifies the Lord...*"

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