

Birthng Something New

A sermon by Rev. Amanda Hendler-Voss

December 10, 2006

Text: Luke 1:39-56 (taken from a creative mix of NRSV and Inclusive Language Lectionary)

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb. Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "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 Sovereign should come to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from God."

And Mary said,

*"My soul magnifies the Sovereign,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
who has regarded the low estate of God's servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
For the one who is mighty has done great things for me,
And holy is God's name.*

*God's mercy is for those who fear God
From generation to generation.*

*God has shown strength with God's arm,
And has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,
God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
And lifted up the lowly;*

*God has filled the hungry with good things,
And sent the rich away empty.*

*God has helped God's servant Israel,
In remembrance of God's mercy,
As God spoke to our ancestors,*

To Abraham [and Sarah] and to their descendents forever."

And Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months and then returned to her home.

Good morning. Please pray with me. Loving God, Mother of new life, Midwife of change, send your Spirit to be in our midst this morning as we await and prepare the way for the birth of your child Jesus into the world again. Amen.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to preach this morning, and I am particularly thankful to have been asked to preach during the Advent season. Yesterday several of us were sitting around at our Christmas pageant rehearsal folding bulletins, when Joe stopped by the sanctuary. Louise, a preschooler whose family is fairly new to our congregation, whispered to her mother, "Look mom, it's God." I asked Noel, who was sitting close enough to Louise to overhear the comment, how it felt to be married to God. She replied that she thinks she can begin to expect a little more at home.

I am thankful to have been asked to preach during the Advent season, because there are certain seasons in our Christian year in which I have always longed to hear women tell and interpret the stories of our faith. Every Easter, for example, I long to hear a woman tell the story of Jesus' resurrection and appearance first to Mary Magdalene. And during Advent, I've often thought that even in our modern (or postmodern) world, women can tell the story of an unwed, pregnant teen named Mary from a unique perspective.

In sharing with you my desire to hear women tell and interpret some of the most important stories of our faith, I am not suggesting that I devalue men, and the many contributions they have made, and continue to make, to the art of preaching, the gift of teaching, or the practice of theology. Our own Bill Petz often reminds me that the sexism and patriarchy that characterize so many of our institutions (the church being just one of them) harms men and women alike, and men have a particular story to tell.

But our story today is one of the few in our biblical text that revolves around women. It's one I've always longed to hear preached from the pulpit by a woman. And well, although I've not yet had the opportunity to hear a woman preach on this text, I'll go ahead and forge a new path with you this morning. I'm grateful for the voice of the Darfuri woman and Penny Stokes' new Magnificat that have already been spoken into our space this morning.

The story of Mary and Elizabeth that we heard earlier has particular significance for me. Like Mary and Elizabeth, I too find myself in a season of expectancy, which is why this robe which fit so beautifully at the time of my ordination is now pitched back at an awkward angle and choking me a little around the neck. Many thanks, by the way, to Lorraine Tuenge, who has furnished me with a borrowed robe, which you will see me in as soon as I am able to get it hemmed.

Like Mary and Elizabeth, I find myself in a time of hushed waiting to see what new life God will birth into the world. They don't always tell you this, but I've found this waiting time can be a confusing, joyful, mysterious, and uncomfortable time. These days I find myself short on breath, unbelievably big in the belly, and subject to occasional kicks in the bladder or diaphragm. Did

you know that the amount of blood pumping through your veins doubles in pregnancy? And so all this extra blood races to your face when you're embarrassed, you hear it pounding like drums in your ears when you are angry, and after a long day—well, it just sort of hangs out in your legs, ankles, and feet. Listing a few of the physical discomforts of pregnancy is to say nothing of the stunning bewilderment of imagining parenthood and the emotional, mental and spiritual confusion that can lead to paralyzing moments of anticipation.

Not that I'm complaining. The gift of new life is perhaps the most precious gift we find on earth, whether in the form of a swollen womb or the first flowers of spring. We wait for it, sometimes wondering if it will ever come at all, and it takes our breath away when it arrives. Annie Dillard writes, "Not only does something come if you wait, but it pours over you like a waterfall, a tidal wave. You wait in all naturalness without expectation or hope, emptied, translucent, and that which comes rocks and topples you; it will shear, loose, launch, winnow, grind."¹ That's how I feel every spring when the earth gives birth again. It pours over me like a tidal wave. I suspect bringing a child into the world is this kind of experience, and also unlike any other experience known to humankind. I expect to be rocked and toppled.

Though my pregnancy, like Mary and Elizabeth's, is literal, this season of Advent reminds me that God is always at work in each of us, doing a new thing often when we least expect it. We have all been given the capacity to birth something holy into this world, something mysteriously unique to the particular gifts and vision that God has blessed us with. So I hope that as you hear this old, old story told again this year, you will consider the new thing that God is at work doing within you. I hope you will imagine your soul lined with stretch marks, your spirit pumping with an overflow of lifeblood, your being readying itself for the birth of something new, something unimaginable, something holy. I believe we were made for this.

Some of you may protest this practice. Someone out there is thinking, "she can't possibly be speaking about me. Little but suffering and death have touched my life for far too many seasons." Or maybe someone is imagining that they are too old for this message. Someone is wondering if they are too young to birth anything of significance into the world. Some of us are in too much pain to imagine God doing a new thing in the most intricate heart of our beings.

And that's what I love about this story. Mary represents the most unlikely among us. Yet rather than listen to the world's message—which called her pregnancy a scandal and a shame—she chose instead to listen to an angel who reminded her of her worth in God's eyes. That's faith, believing in something

¹ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

longed for yet unseen. And sometimes it is those who are the most beaten down in our world who have the greatest capacity for this kind of faith, because it's absolutely essential for their daily survival. When no one believes in you, when the world seems positioned against you, when all you breathe in is hostility from those around you, it becomes more essential than ever to listen to the sweet voice of the angel who tells us that God has chosen us, and God is at work within us.

I chose to preach this morning on Luke's account of two pregnant women blessing one another, because I believe, metaphorically, that is who we are. We are a people pregnant with God's promise. In Luke chapter 1, Elizabeth, a woman thought to be too old to bear fruit, is pregnant with John, the one who will clear the way for Jesus. Mary, young and unwed, is pregnant with Jesus, the one who will reconcile all of creation to God and to one another. Like Elizabeth and Mary, God has placed within each of us—male and female, young and old—the promise of new life, and we must be caretakers for each other, as these women were. We must bless one another and give thanks to God together, as our spirits stretch with the form of God's good gift.

Our text for this morning begins by telling us that, in those days, Mary set out and went with haste to be with her cousin by blood and sister in the Spirit, Elizabeth. Mary set out. She left her hometown and her people, she abandoned the daily tasks that surely cried out for attention, she vacated her dwelling place with its comfortable familiarity, and she set out. She set out to seek out Elizabeth.

Earlier in Luke we witnessed an angel appearing to Mary to bring the good news—God desired to bless her, and through Jesus, to bless all of creation. Mary left Nazareth as one pregnant with the promise of God.

The text doesn't tell us why she set out. Maybe she left Nazareth because hometown folks tend to get suspicious when God blesses us with something a little out-of-the-ordinary, when we take part in the unexpected. Do you know what I'm talking about? When a woman throws off the shackles of the status quo, when she is a part of something that extends beyond what society, and the religious authorities, say is acceptable for a woman, people start to talk.

And if this radical woman is yet a young woman—if she's a young, pregnant, unmarried woman, then almost all assume she has no blessing, no gift from God to offer to us. Perhaps she set out to the hill country to escape the deadly addiction to the ordinary that permeated her hometown.

Or maybe Mary set out because she was restless. Perhaps she could feel God's promise pressing on her heart. She was swollen full of it.

Whatever Mary's reason for leaving home, we know where she was headed. I believe she knew that in her season of growing a baby, she would need the special companionship and nurturing that Elizabeth could provide.

And so, as a young woman in her first trimester of pregnancy, she traveled close to 80 miles to be with Elizabeth. Women of God will do that. They will pack a bag, put on their traveling shoes, and set out with haste just to be with their sisters in the Spirit. It's a holy alliance.

So I want to urge all of us today—men and women alike—to set out with haste this Advent season. I want to urge us to abandon our comfort zones, slide our wearied feet into traveling shoes, and set out on this journey through Advent and into Christmas. Set out with haste. Set out with haste, because we need to be renewed. Set out with haste, because we need to be replenished. Set out with haste, because we are a people pregnant with God's promise, and God is a faithful midwife.

According to Mary's song of praise when she finally reached the house of Elizabeth, God's promise is this: to lift up the lowly and bring down the powerful; to fill the hungry and send the rich away empty. God's promise is this: that every valley shall be exulted and every hill and mountain shall be made low; the rough places will be made plain and the crooked places will be made straight. God's promise is this: the last shall be first and the first shall be last. These are the promises we are to contemplate during Advent and into Christmas, when God comes to us again as a tiny infant, open to all the joy and suffering that stitch together the human experience. God is coming to us as a child, calling to us to lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things. Advent is a season that asks us to see anew, to seek out the new life that God offers to us again and again.

And in case you've forgotten what God looks like in the form of a child, I invite you back to this space at 4:00 this afternoon to witness our annual Christmas pageant, which our children and youth have worked so hard to create with the wise guidance of our pageant director Katherine Daven, pageant music director Lea Sageser, and choreographer Smitty Dotson-Smith. I believe you will catch a glimpse of God's image in our children and youth tonight.

We are all pregnant with God's promise of new life, but make no mistake: what we birth is not ours to possess. Elizabeth did not possess John's wilderness ministry. Mary could not contain Jesus' destiny. We give birth to the gifts God has planted within us, just as we give birth to our children, and then we release them into community. We are asked to name, bless, and nurture the gifts that we birth, and then to release them back to God.

In Alex Haley's book *Roots*, he opens the story with the birth and naming ceremony of Kunta. Haley writes, "Omoró then walked out before all the assembled people of the village. Moving to his wife's side, he lifted up the infant and, as all watched, whispered three times into his son's ear the name chosen for him. It was the first time the name had ever been spoken as this child's name, for

Omoró's people felt that each human being should be the first to know" who they are. Later, "out under the moon and the stars...Omoró completed the naming ritual. Carrying little Kunta in his arms...he walked to the edge of the village, lifted his baby up with his face to the heavens, and said softly, 'Behold—the only thing greater than yourself.'"² We name, bless, and nurture our gifts, promises and visions, then we introduce them to the world and release them back into God's good keeping.

There is a beautiful song by Sweet Honey in the Rock, in which they sing Kahlil Gibran's poem "On Children." The words remind us that what we birth is not ours, and though we may nurture it, we will never possess it. It says, "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and the daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, and though they are with you they belong not to you."³ My friends and companions on this Advent journey, your gifts are not your gifts. They are the seeds and the seedlings of God's longing for us. God is coming to be among us this Advent season. Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Alex Haley, *Roots*

³ Khalil Gibran, "On Children"