

COM Sermon
Catching Courage
Luke 1: 39-55
by Nancy Hastings Sehested
December 11, 2016

One of the best descriptions of our community of faith came from Dale. He said that this is a community who meets regularly to catch courage from one another. And so we have come together at the dimming of this day to sing and pray courage into each other, infusing our bodies and souls with the Spirit of the Divine Courage-Giver.

It's happened before. It happened in another hill country in a region called Judea with two unlikely women. It's a story that usually doesn't make its way into Christmas pageants but it should.

You know the story. The angel Gabriel had been making the rounds. One stop was to an old priest named Zechariah. The divine messenger came with the news to get the nursery ready because barren Elizabeth was going to have a baby after all. After all that shame that had been heaped upon her by the community because of her empty womb, after all that resignation, after all the unanswered prayers, after all that time with her aging body, she was carrying new life.

"Don't be afraid, Zechariah," said the messenger. But he was afraid, so afraid that he couldn't even get a sermon out for nine months. He was shocked into silence, without any words to name this extraordinary news. The news was so new that the old words didn't work. The priest who usually had many words lost his voice.

And Elizabeth? She found her voice. She thanked God for this gift, and her release from the endless years of shame she'd endured from her very own people.

Gabriel's next stop was another "Don't be afraid" message given to a young unmarried woman named Mary in a tiny village of Nazareth. He offered the fearful message that she was going to have a baby, and he'd be great. Really great. Great for everybody.

Mary was “deeply disturbed” with the news. Of course. It was life-changing news. Her world was turning upside down. Favored? How could that be? It seemed like no favor.

Gabriel also announced that her relative Elizabeth was pregnant. And then he left Mary with a beautiful meditative thought: “With God nothing is impossible.”

The same news that released one woman from shame sent another one into shame. Location is everything. Both were located in the land of vulnerability.

It’s not easy to be alone with earth-shattering news. Mary knew she needed a friend. She made her way to visit with Elizabeth. Not her fiancé Joseph. Elizabeth.

She needed to catch some courage from someone who not only was in her condition, but also someone who’d been in her condition of communal shame. So Mary made the journey. Travel was limited. Roads were dangerous. Mary made her way nonetheless.

And when they greeted each other, their surprise paths interlocked, and the invisible life within them was made evident by the quickening of the new life in Elizabeth. She knew. She understood. She welcomed Mary.

Women talk. Pregnant women talk, about their worries and their excitement. Did they talk about how neither one of them had prayed for the pregnancies? Elizabeth had given up any hope for a baby. Mary was not hoping for one at that time in her life. God dreamed it up all on Her own.

How could this be, indeed, Mary. And if timing is everything, God’s was off. It was not a safe time for a baby to be born. Mary’s town in Galilee was small yet surrounded by the big anxious-making elements of the eastern empire. Elizabeth lived in Judea, where King Herod reigned with all his terrors. The power politics reached to Rome. Just to the north was Syria, the military headquarters readying the weapons to swoop down and seize Jerusalem.

In a risky time, in a risky place, in a risky situation, what did Elizabeth and Mary do? They gave each other blessing. They knew they'd been chosen for something beyond their understanding. They knew they were vehicles of divine work.

In that call they formed a bond between them. It was the call to form community, an essential ingredient to any daring journey. They affirmed and encouraged each other. They were not alone. The institutions that claimed and shamed them did not name them. They took the name "favored" and safeguarded it as a treasure of their soul.

These are the disciples to follow in these kind of times.

Then Mary, the adventurous young woman fierce with hope searched for words to mark the holy moment. What were the songs she'd been taught? What did she remember? What did she know by heart?

Mary reached back a thousand years to a singer named Hannah, a once-barren woman who held her longed-for baby and sang to God of thanksgiving and praise. That's the song that welled up from the deepest part of Mary. With some creative changes she made it her own, as we all must do with the songs and stories given to us.

It was a revolutionary song. It was a song that had tumbled down through the centuries, a song heard in slave quarters and refugee camps. It was a song sung in prison dungeons and in exiled lands. Mary caught it in her throat and sang it full force. And we're still singing its melody of gratitude, justice and mercy.

For two thousand years it has been known as *The Magnificat*, a hope-rallying song heard on rocky hillsides and in grand cathedrals. A song still chanted by monastics at evensong as darkness approaches. A song that has breathed life and courage into countless less favored ones who found favor with God's divine incarnating ways. New life is coming. Get ready. God's birthing a common vision of interlocking lives of interdependence. God's initiating wonder.

The words came out of Mary as past tense. God *has* shown strength. God *has* scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. God *has* brought down the mighty from their thrones and lifted those of low degree. God *has* filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich empty away.

God *has*. God *has*. God *has*. It's the words of hope we repeat to remember that God *has* acted and surely will again. God *has* brought slaves out of Egypt. God *has* led the exiles home. Yes. And God *will*. God *will*. God *will*.

And an unfavorable young woman from a still war-torn and fear-saturated part of the world was favored by God to smuggle hope into the world through her body. And her womb brought forth a baby that transformed her...and kick-started a transformation of love that still is changing the world...our world.

Somehow her body and soul held the muscle memory of generations...giving her the imagination to open her life to new possibility....giving her the courage to see the soul power growing within her even as she named the power of God all around her.

Mary's song provides prenatal class exercises for breathing deeply through the pain and struggles. It reaches past our tiny space in time to see our place in all time. We see those faithful ones who trusted in more than they could see, and more than they could understand, and more than they could imagine, to experience The Mystery One who hangs out in delivery rooms laboring with us to new life.

Mary's poetry connected the personal and the political, the individual with the communal, the heart and the mind, the hope and the joy. Mary's song illumines the Divine Midwife accompanying us in our laboring, breathing courage into us. "You're gonna make it. I'm with you, just as I've been with the others before you."

Mary is the courageous disciple to follow in times like these. We're still singing and dancing with her. Our great temptation is to belittle our

contributions, act as if our small little acts don't matter in the great power struggles. Our temptation is to despair and act as if we are alone.

French philosopher Michel Foucault said: *“People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does.”*

I spent six hours on Wednesday night in an emergency room in NYC. My sister and I had been ice skating with Sydney. While Sydney was zooming around the rink, Abigail and I skated slowly but capably for women like us...until Abigail fell. She broke her wrist.

We took a cross town bus to arrive in the waiting room to wait. And wait and wait. I told her she should try screaming with pain like some others so maybe she'd be seen sooner.

But no. Instead Abigail got busy tidying up the waiting room.

I took over her work while she was getting x-rays. And I waited and watched. I saw a doctor and nurse walking through the room of the hurting, checking to see who needed immediate attention. Was it the Hasidic Jewish young man limping, or the housekeeper with her employer translating her pain? Was it the young Latino family with the crying baby? Was it the construction worker with his ballooning leg? Was it the elderly Asian couple with the husband pleading for someone to ease his wife's pain?

In that place, someone eased the pain of another. Someone listened to an anxious story. Someone held a crying baby. Someone gave up their chair for another. Someone dried a tear. Someone reset a broken wrist.

And the world was upended.

We're in this wounded world together. We offer what we can to ease the burdens rarely knowing what we do does.

But surely it changes the way the world breathes through the pain.

Jesse our caller for our family dance said that we engaged in all the things that make for good community building last Sunday night. We worked together, prayed together, sang together, ate together and danced together. We caught courage from each other. And it left us with that unusually good feeling of joy.

We're catching it all the time, if we stay open to receiving.
A habitat house was built from the Christmas jam music.
A young school-girl with little English is making cookies with BJ. A
difficult third grader is learning to juggle with Kim. A single mother is
finding help for her children at the YWCA with Beth. A flooded family in
Louisiana gets re-building help from Buzz and Suzy. A traumatized teen is
learning resiliency from Stephy and Susanne. Five families received food
yesterday at their doorstep with the joyful help of our children. A Cuban
church is welcoming strangers from enemy land.

We can go on and on....
This is the melody we know.
This is the song we're singing.
This is how we're catching courage.

We can't trace all the connecting points. We can't chart the genealogy of
courage that ignites us. If an unlikely woman with a wee baby can transform
the world with love...well....

Our Creator still likes to work in the dark, in waiting rooms, in out-of-the-
way places...swirling together goodness and mercy from generation to
generation.

These are the stories we share.
This is the melody we sing.
This is how we're catching courage.
This is how we dance with joy.

How long? Nine months or nine hundred years. No matter.
We're singing our way through. The world is about to turn.
God's still in the birthing rooms and all's wild with the world.

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*They will come to Zion shouting for joy,
everlasting joy on their faces;
joy and gladness will go with them
and sorrow and lament be ended. (Isaiah 35:10, Jerusalem Bible)*