

"THE GEOGRAPHY OF JESUS: NAZARETH TO THE HILL COUNTRY"

Isaiah 35:1-10 Luke 1:26-45

December 15, 2019 Advent Three

York Center Church of the Brethren

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Who knows what a "gender reveal party" is? For those who don't, it is a party where expectant parents announce the gender of their unborn baby. And it is done in a visual way- with the colors blue or pink prominently displayed.

Who has been to one? What was done to reveal the gender?

I think, initially, these parties began simply with cake. The expectant parents would cut into a cake and the inside would be blue for a boy or pink for a girl. But you know how people are- they want to outdo each other. In this age of social media- they want to get as many "likes" as they can. Not surprisingly, this can lead to some pretty disastrous gender reveal fiascos.

A small plane in Turkey, Texas crashed during a gender reveal stunt. The pilot released 350 gallons of pink water before stalling the plane and crashing. The pilot and a passenger (in a plane built for one) escaped with minor injuries.

An off-duty Border Patrol agent in Arizona set off fireworks in dry grasslands and besides revealing the gender of his child, he ignited a catastrophic wildfire that eventually destroyed 47,000 acres, cost \$8 billion, and took 800 firefighters to extinguish.

A 56 year-old woman in Iowa was struck in the head with shrapnel and killed when a family member set off what was essentially a pipe bomb filled with gun powder, metal, and the gender revealing powder.

Every time I hear one of these stories I ask, "What is wrong with people?"

But lest we think "gender reveal" events are a recent phenomenon, allow me to introduce you to the ultimate "gender revealer," the Angel Gabriel. He is named only four times scripture- twice in the Old Testament book of Daniel and twice in the New Testament. Luke is the biblical writer who names Gabriel as the gender revealer and pregnancy test all in one heavenly messenger. He first visits the old priest Zechariah to tell him that he and his wife, Elizabeth will have a son long after it is humanly possible. As if that announcement wasn't extraordinary enough, six months later he visits a girl named Mary and tells her that not only will she have a son, but he will be the Son of God.

How's that for a gender reveal?

Turns out that Mary and Elizabeth are cousins and as soon as Gabriel leaves and Mary catches her breath, she goes to see Elizabeth. Lest you think Elizabeth's home was just a short Uber ride away, take a look at the map in your bulletin.

Mary lived in Nazareth. Elizabeth lived in the Judean Hill Country three miles from Jerusalem and nearly 70 miles from Nazareth. To get there, Mary would have, of course, skirted around Samaria on the other side of the Jordan River, because Jews and Samaritans were enemies. It is almost impossible to believe that this pregnant teenager would have walked, alone, for over a week, through rough and dangerous terrain to see her cousin. Some scholars believe that Joseph would have ensured her safety by either traveling with her or getting her a ride with a caravan traveling south. I like to think that is true.

Regardless of how she got there, Mary undertook a long and dangerous trip to see her cousin but it was worth it.

- Who else could have understood Mary's claim that she was visited by Gabriel?
- Who else could have understood an impossible pregnancy?
- Who else would have agreed that the fingerprints of God were all over their miraculous stories?
- Who else would have known what it felt like to one day, have nothing, and the next to have everything?

Elizabeth did understand because as soon as she saw her young, travel weary cousin, she spoke the words of a prophet. *"Blessed are you among women! And blessed is the child in your womb! How fortunate for me that the mother of my Lord has come to my home! As soon as I heard your voice, the child in my womb leaped for joy! Blessed are you for believing God's promise!"*

Can you imagine Mary's relief? Elizabeth was six months pregnant, which was probably very taxing on her elderly body. No doubt she was exhausted. She didn't know Mary was coming to visit and she didn't know Mary was also pregnant. Maybe Mary wondered during her long trip, "What if Elizabeth doesn't believe me about Gabriel's visit? What if she doesn't want this scandal in her home?" But of course, Elizabeth did believe her and welcomed her with open arms.

They were two ordinary women carrying extraordinary pregnancies and they needed one another. The one is old and her son will close an age; the other is young and her son will bring in the new age.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months- probably until John was born. I imagine that they spoke often of the surprising and miraculous ways of God and marveled at the children they were carrying. Perhaps they shared their fears and uncertainties about the world their sons would face. What a comfort they were for one another. No one else could begin to understand what they were going through, but they had each other. I like to think that was an extra gift to each from a gracious God. Their lives have been disrupted in ways they could never have imagined and perhaps would not have chosen for themselves. But they embraced God's exquisite mysteries and they embraced each another.

John and Jesus will, one day, embark on separate yet coordinated prophetic careers that will lead to God's radical transformation of the world. One will prepare the way for the other. John will baptize Jesus who will then set off on his own ministry journey. Scripture doesn't record any other meetings between the two- but they certainly kept tabs on each other. And when John was murdered by a desperate and despicable ruler, Jesus grieved his death.

But before any of this ever happened- their two mothers comforted and supported each another, offering hope and encouragement as they each embarked on similar, yet separate journeys with no precedent, no instruction manual, and no map.

Our Advent journey through the "Geography of Jesus" has brought us to the third Sunday. The children's passport stamp today was of baby footprints- a reminder that it is a baby we seek on our journey through this season.

One writer suggests that "Advent is a time for telling the truth- the truth of our weariness and our anxiety, yes, but also the truth of the relentless generosity of God, which opens up futures that seem to be shut down." (1)

Biblical scholar and prophet, Walter Brueggemann, tells us, "The whole tenor of Advent is that God may act in us, through us, beyond us, more than we imagined because newness is on its way among us. Advent is preparation for the demands of newness that will break the tired patterns of fear in our lives."

(These Advent scripture texts are outrageous.) The new world of God is beyond our capacity and even beyond our imagination. It does not seem possible. In our fatigue, our self-sufficiency, and our cynicism, we deeply believe that such promises could not happen here. In Advent, however, we receive the power of God that lies beyond us. This power is the antidote to our fatigue and cynicism. It is the gospel resolution to our spent self-sufficiency, when we are at the edge of our coping. It is the good news that will overmatch our cynicism that imagines there is no new thing that can enter our world." (2)

One of the reasons I love the Advent season is because it reminds us that the impossible possibilities of God are grounded in hope. These days hope is hard to find- political upheaval, climate disasters, gun violence, rampant racism, deadly homophobia, the refugee crisis, the despicable actions of our government on our southern border. The list seems endless, yet through it all, I hold on to the hope promised in Advent.

Celeste Kennel-Shank addresses these concerns when she writes, "Hope and despair dance cheek to cheek around me often. Each year we repeat Advent rituals. We sing the hymns and recite the familiar verses. Time overlaps, the present and the future tenses proclaiming God's transformation even as we still long for it. What would it look like to really let Advent proclamations seep into our weariest places, where despair creeps in and threatens to take hold?"

How might we find hope when our efforts seem to fail- not just hope for someday but hope for now?"

Maybe hope is as basic as refusing to give up. Hope is continuing to be God's hands and feet in the world, even when the odds are against us. Hope is openness to transformation, listening and looking for signs of God's action happening all around us. Hope is trust in the character of God as one who brings justice to the oppressed not just tomorrow but today. Hope is knowing that God acts in human history for liberation and restoration. (3)

Into my despair comes this story of two women- one too young and one too old- both with no value to their society. But while the world continues around them, while a tyrannical government oppresses their people, while religious leaders worship their own self-importance, while wars and rumors of war rage all around, while the poor are trampled by the rich- these two women provide safe harbor for two incredible secrets- the prophet and the Messiah. While the world continues with business as usual their lives are irrevocably changed and they experience this change together.

Mary and Elizabeth provide a glimpse of God's Beloved Community- a place where we are welcomed and loved, nurtured and protected; a place where we are believed and celebrated. While others worried about what the Romans might do next, Mary watched in wonder as Elizabeth's belly grew rounder and fuller. The older woman, who was burdened her whole adult life with the failure of barrenness, was fairly bursting with new life. Together, they carried the plot of God's greatest promise for the world. While life as usual went on around them, with no one else any wiser, they quietly nurtured two lives that would burst into the world in ways no one could have imagined.

During the season of Advent, we ponder the truth that the holy One did burst into our earthly realm, during a specific time, and at a specific place on the map. And still does.

I have never read a better sermon on this text than Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon, "Mothers of God." She reminds us that Mary is the only person in the history of the world who ever had to agree to that particular call from God. That is why she is remembered as "Theotokos," the "God-bearer." Teenaged Mary is the only person who consented to carry, give birth to, nurse, and raise the son of God. She agreed to the risky and dangerous plan to "smuggle God into the world inside her own body." (4)

We may not be asked to smuggle God into the world inside our own bodies, but that doesn't mean we aren't called to be mothers of God. Meister Eckhart, a medieval mystic and theologian wrote, "We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself?"

And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? This, then is the fullness of time: When the Son of God is begotten in us." (5)

The truth of the Gospel is that we too are containers of the holy. We too are called to become filled with divine possibilities and to give birth to the holy and precious in our time. What are we doing to make the reign of God a reality in this place, at this time, at this dot on the map?

Elizabeth was an old woman. Mary was just a kid. They both played crucial roles in God's plan to transform the world.

Will you?

Amen.

End Notes:

- "Compiler's Note," by Richard Floyd, from *CELEBRATING ABUNDANCE: DEVOTIONS FOR ADVENT*, Walter Bruggemann. Westminster John Knox Press. 2017. P. 1.
- *CELEBRATING ABUNDANCE*, pp. 5,7.
- "Living the Word," Celeste Kennel-Shank, *THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY*, December 4, 2019. p. 18.

- "Mothers of God," Barbara Brown Taylor, *GOSPEL MEDICINE*, Cowley. 1995. P. 152-153.
- Barbara Brown Taylor, p. 153.
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