

“Two Women of God”
The Third Sunday in Advent – Dec 23, 2018 – Luke 1:49-56/C

I don't know if you've paid any attention to our Vicar and Youth Director this month - specifically their attire – but Emily and Megan have been participating in **Dress-ember**, a movement created to advocate for women's issues. I'm so very proud of these young women as our role models, for they have decided to take on the extremely important and timely issue of human trafficking – using their choice of clothing to elicit dialogue – and to raise money and awareness about those that want more than anything to remain undetected, unseen and unhindered in our own back yard – those who deal in human slavery. Please take the time to talk with these women about their Dress-ember experience: not only about wearing a **dress** every day in December, but about the responses they've gotten to these simple, quiet acts of justice for the purpose of highlighting ways to address injustice.

Our Gospel today shares a picture of two other women from long ago in Scripture.

Elizabeth, who appears only in the 1st chapter of Luke, and Mary (Jesus' mother) who is referenced sparsely throughout the New Testament, except in **John**, where we meet her at a wedding in Cana of Galilee, when Jesus is already 30 years old, and poised to begin his ministry.

According to Dr. James Kay of Princeton Theological Seminary, “**Mark** skips Jesus' birth altogether and Jesus seems indifferent to his mother when she shows up with his brothers in chapter 3. In **Matthew**, Mary is mute: she is present, but silent... **Paul** thinks it worth remarking that God's Son was ‘born of a woman’ but he never bothers to mention her name.

It's a good thing we have **Luke**, because he not only remembers her name...but lets Mary have a history. She speaks and she SINGS! not just about some thing, but about Someone.” So, today, we are privileged to eavesdrop on a family gathering, the encounter between Mary and her elderly cousin, Elizabeth, two of the best singers in the family. Elizabeth was old enough to be Mary's grandmother, and she was much wiser and was probably the only living human being that could fathom what was happening in Mary's young life. For in these two kinswomen, the “birth-pangs of a new age” that we heard about at the beginning of the Advent season are beginning to come about in their bodies.

Once again, we see that “God's ways are not our ways” and that God's work will seldom look like whatever it is that we had planned. But just imagine this meeting between a recently barren old woman and a recent virgin who looks to all the world like an unwed mother

It takes courage say yes to God (especially since God is often short on details for your future. Revelation seems to be one of God's favorite pastimes!) Case in point, the stories from the new show on tv this fall called *God Friended Me* – which I probably wouldn't have watched except it came on right after 60 Minutes, which of course follows the late Sunday afternoon football games on CBS. The name itself was enough to make a lot of folks change the channel, but actually, it has been quite fun to watch, and I bet some great messages came across to viewers through the young internet blogger who doesn't believe in God. He's the one who keeps getting these friend request suggestions from God, which (when followed), help him help others – which is what he is all about in the first place. It reminded me of a show awhile back called *Joan of Arcadia*, another “if you see or hear God today, and God asks you to do something, you really should say yes.”

Mary said yes, but that doesn't mean she was not afraid. It's easy for us to focus on her faithful consent to “*let it be with me according to your word*,” but forget to imagine what struggles she had to comply with Gabriel's angelic, “*Do not be afraid*.” But Mary has reason to be afraid. While Elizabeth's pregnancy would have been understood by her community as a miraculous sign

of God's favor, Mary's would have been cause for alarm—cause, even, for her to be put to death. In her context, an unmarried woman found to be pregnant was subject to the law of execution by stoning at the entrance of her father's house, as noted in Deuteronomy 22.

I wonder if Mary's haste to travel to the Judean hill country southwest of Jerusalem as an ancient display of the fight-or-flight response... is it the overwhelming divine encounter itself? Or the reality of its aftermath? Or is it sheer panic, or a gut reaction to stay alive – to survive?

You know, being an Advocate (in church they call us Disciples) is hard! Listening to what God is saying to you when it seems impossible, scary and absurd is exactly how the world gets changed. And it could be, that when you are afraid to change the world, it helps to sing. After all, what do angels always say? *Do not be afraid.* And what do angels seem to be doing a lot of in the Christmas story? Singing. Apparently, music overcomes our fear. It worked for Mary and Elizabeth.

And in more modern times, it worked for composer Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) who was also a Catholic priest and a violinist and spent most of his life in Venice. Do you know how Vivaldi earned a living? He worked as choirmaster at the Pietà, an orphanage, which funded its work by training the orphans to sing. Vivaldi's job was to compose music for this choir to attract the wealthy to support and finance the institution. Since mixed choirs were not allowed in churches, boys were not a part of the choir. Most left the orphanage to take apprenticeships, so Vivaldi trained lower-class young girls - with no hopes, prospects, or protectors – and gave them a song to sing, and offering them a chance to better themselves and others like them. They were truly singing Mary's song. Through them, the Holy Spirit was lifting up the humble and meek and sending the rich away a good deal emptier. They were incubating the gospel of transformation just as Mary, in her womb, was incubating the word of God. And Vivaldi, perhaps channeling God's creativity, was engaging people's talents and promise, not their neediness and suffering.

Singing songs of freedom and justice for all in a world that wants only to take care of itself is dangerous. It might even cause us to fear singing at all. But if you can take your fears to the arms of a faithful community that will remind you of God's blessings and embolden you to turn again toward the face of Jesus...then you will sing the songs of Advent and Christmas and Easter the way you sing *Holden Evening Prayer*. Because you will be singing Mary's song, and Elizabeth's song, maybe even Megan's and Emily's songs, and definitely the songs of angels. Blessings my friends, for your time of Advent waiting is ending. Merry Christmas. Do not be afraid to sing. Amen.

Pastor Susan Langhauser
Advent Lutheran Church, Olathe
The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Resources: Dressebmer.org, #ItsBiggerThanaDress; Austin Crenshaw Shelley, *Sunday's Coming*, Dec 2018 and Samuel Wells *Vivaldi's business plan*, Feb 2014 (Christian Century online).