

We started our Advent journey with hope – that thing we see way out on the horizon. Of course, the horizon is not always in a hurry to meet us in the present. Next, we moved to peace, the assurance that God’s presence in our own lives will eventually move our horizons into the present. Last week, it was joy, the feeling that washes over us when hope and peace finally sink in. Today, we land on love. And I wonder, could it be that love is the place or the space where the Spirit moves the heart?

I’m not sure why Luke’s author only devotes a few verses to Mary and Elizabeth’s retreat. It seems to me there could have been a whole volume of meaningful content. Still, our lection is full of promise. Here are two remarkable women, kindred by blood, but also kindred by human experience. Sure, one is full of youth, and the other a bit more seasoned. Still, both know angst, and uncertainty, and alienation.

“What kind of world are we bringing our children into?” they wonder. “And what is happening to our bodies? Is this normal? And how come everybody’s looking at us, judging us, afraid of us, because our story of motherhood isn’t scripted like a Hallmark Channel Christmas movie?”

And like every expectant mother, these two strong, wonderful women carry the burden of expectancy. Is there even a single moment for an expectant mother, even in sleep, that isn’t filled with both the hope of what can be for their child, and the angst of what might not ever be?

And this is to say nothing of prophecies, and visions, and strange creatures who tell both Mary and Elizabeth of the promise, and importance, and redemption their children will bring to a weary people.

My goodness, I wonder what these women saw when they closed their eyes and imagined the horizon? Was it a stubborn or begrudging hope, or was it persistent, or was it jubilant? And when did peace sink in for them? Did they find assurance in strange angels, or in the realization that the “protectors,” the men of tradition and standing among them, were even more awestruck and overwhelmed by the curious annunciations than their spouses?

Or did they find peace in the swagger of motherhood, in the pure calling of knowing they were created to nurture and steward life? What must it feel like to know that the Mighty One uses Her might, does great things, has purpose – great, grand, wonderful purpose – for your own life, and for that of your children?

Now imagine carrying all of these shared experiences, experiences that are SO foreign to everyone in your daily circles, and then uniting with the one person in your life who can relate. Imagine being in the company of one who sees and celebrates your blessedness, your giftedness, and your purpose while simultaneously experiencing her own blessedness, giftedness, and purpose. You might be so bold as to call this a story of abundance.

There is hope for what will be. Peace, brought on by the assurance of God's presence. Joy, in the company of God's children. So much joy, that Elizabeth's child leaps in her womb, and Mary sings her magnificent song. The Spirit is moving, making space for love. The love these women share with one another, will soon be made manifest in the lives of their children, and eventually in our own lives.

The ancient stories speak of bringing new life into a messy world full of chaos and uncertainty. The story of expectant motherhood is a fitting metaphor for the Advent season. Each of us, in our own way, is seeking to bring light into weariness. It might be a sense of normalcy in a post-pandemic world. It might be release from grief, or rest from topsy-turviness, or belonging in the midst of loneliness, or even just a civil and polite dinner conversation that isn't derailed by the partisanship and polarization of our time. We're seeking to bear witness to God's doing, and being, God's good doing and good being, in the world.

It's a terrifying thing – meaning both exhilarating and scary, wonderful and anxious – to believe that our lives are witness to God's transformation. I mean that's a pretty overwhelming responsibility, kind of like bringing a child into the world.

But here's what we know about community, be it a community of two like Mary and Elizabeth, or one with a few more than two, like ours. When we discover a shared sense of each other – joy, pain, hope, grief, purpose, giftedness, blessedness, createdness – we create spaces where the Spirit moves among us. We create a place to love and be loved. And our love, however ordinary, or quirky, or cozy, or Sardisy, helps birth God anew in the seasons to come.

Sardis, God's hope is coming. Find peace in the assurance of its arrival. Dance with joy in such a realization. And in the company of one another, let love make room to stir our spirits. It's Christmas, y'all. Let's get ready together!

Amen.