

Namaste

In a book called *The Heart Aroused*, David Whyte records a story of his hiking in the Himalayas:

Needing some time to himself, he parted company with a fellow hiker and his Sherpa, and took a trail that ran parallel to theirs, promising to meet back up with them in a few of days. On the second day of walking alone, he arrived at a footbridge over a deep ravine. One cable of the bridge had broken, and so the planks of the bridge sort of hung from a tightrope – the way he described it, the bridge looks like one that Indiana Jones would encounter just as he’s attempting an escape from the bad guys.

After contemplating the bridge for some time – he says it’s an hour, but you know how slow time moves when you are sitting alone with your fears – after looking at the bridge for quite a long time, he decides to turn around and go back to where the trail split so he can try to catch up with his companions. Just as he’s picking up his backpack, he noticed a silhouette coming toward him up the path. It’s an older woman, with a large basket balanced on her back. She’s collecting dung to use as fuel and so doesn’t notice him until she comes upon his boots and looks up startled, then gets a little smirk on her face as if humored by her own surprise.

She says to him that greeting exchanged in Nepal, with slightly bowed head, *Namaste*, translated something like “I greet the God in you.” (Whyte’s translation) He returned the reply just in time before she bolted across the bridge-turned tight-rope in a few strides, and after she did, she turned back and looked at him with what he describes as a mischievous smile,

Before he could think about it, he picked up his pack and followed.

Whyte reflects on this experience, writing that at any moment in our daily lives, even in the urban jungles of concrete and steel, any man or woman come upon a moment where the bridge we had hoped to cross has fallen, where we confront within ourselves “the deep physical shame that we are not enough, will never be enough, and can never measure up.”

I wonder how Elizabeth and Mary felt in their pregnancies.

Elizabeth, pregnant in her old age, must have had as much as concern as joy. Surely she was aware of the stories of women older than herself – she had Sarah as a model. But just as surely she had seen the difficulties of pregnancies among older women, many not nearly as old as she, given the lack of health care such as is available to us. Even with a promise from an angel that this was of God, that didn’t erase the reality of her humanness, her ability to question, and fear, as well as to hope.

While I find it a bit fantastical to believe there was a supernatural recognition by a pre-natal John to a pre-natal Jesus, I find the idea in the story presents a beautiful image for us, something like the *Namaste* of the Nepalese greeting: the God in me salutes the God in you. And in such a greeting, one that is not so much heard as felt, Elizabeth not only greets Mary, Elizabeth expresses courage in the face of a chasm both women must cross, a tightrope life ahead of them.

Elizabeth also acknowledges that within each of them, at work growing inside each of their own lives, is the life of God, the desire of God for the world to become more than it is, for the world to be restored to that for which it was intended.

I wonder at that these two women, certainly aware of the fragility of their own existences, who, in spite of a world in which they surely were least likely to be conceived of as the bearers of a new order, that in fact it is they who conceived the prophet and the Messiah who would upend the powers of that old order. In an old barren woman, and a young unmarried maiden, the inconceivable was conceived, cousins in faith who would call for repentance and conversion, who would teach a new way, who would reveal more clearly God's desire for a world in which people simply did justice, loved mercy, and walked humbly with their creator.

I wonder at a God who generation after generation uses those who would otherwise be seen as useless, who brings righteousness out of the scandalous, who reveals power through the powerless. Perhaps it is not so important whether John really moved in the womb, or even whether Elizabeth interpreted that kick as a full-body doxological gesture by the prophet already at work in the womb. In Elizabeth's body, she is portrayed as somehow connecting the beauty of life within herself to the holiness of life within Mary, and that is something that each of us could spend our lives learning how to do - to recognize the presence of God in one another, and to celebrate the presence of God in one another.

This story, historically factual or not, is beautiful for its insistence on the possibility that the God within each of us enables us to respond to another person as a bearer of God.

This story of Elizabeth and Mary causes me to wonder at how the communities told and wrote and retold these stories of two expecting mothers, and of Jesus and John the Baptist - how they told these stories as a way of reflecting on the moments when they, as a people, came to a chasm with a fallen bridge, and how these stories helped them to confront the feeling of shame at not being enough.

How does a community facing oppression and violence overcome fear - either the fear of death, or the fear of their smallness - to sing a song like the *Magnificat*? How can we sing the *Magnificat* when we see the powers of the world that seem so much bigger than us and are unwilling to tackle the problem of gun and other violence in our culture?

I wonder that, when we survey the grand canyon of lamentable evils and failures in our day - from mass shootings to financial cliffs, from domestic violence to homelessness, from all forms of abuse and neglect that tear down and destroy the creatures of God - we can still offer up as the church's prayer the millennia old song of Mary, a song that harkens back to the much older song of the prophetess Hannah, a song of God upending the topsy-turvy status quo or presumed power in the world; a song of courage that comes from knowing a God is being birthed from within each of us, that the very power, and love, and creativity of God is growing inside each of us.

From the edge of a precipice, we too, peer out into an uncertain future once again this Christmas, we stand over the canyon of a world so deep in its violence, in its unjust economies, in its oppressiveness, in its desperate need for justice and mercy and humility, for a Messiah.

Meister Eckart of the 13th to 14th century, wrote, "We are all called to be mothers of God, for God is always waiting to be born". Are we willing to listen for that little kick within us, the kick of life the pregnant spaces of our hearts and souls, to recognize the power of God that is at work within, doing more than we can conceive? Or better yet, are we listening for one to say to us "Blessed is the fruit of your life, the life of God that is within you?" And when we hear it, let us set out in faith along that tightrope across the chasms we must face each day, trusting the hope that is within us to hold us up.