

“Beyond our Expectations”

Luke 1: 5-56. Advent 3/B

December 14, 2008

Lynne M. Dolan

It's a miracle. How often have you heard that proclaimed? The pathology report comes back and the doctor says there is no evidence of cancer. It's a miracle. The pregnancy test you take, the one it seems you have taken a hundred times before says “pregnant” and you whisper it's a miracle. You get a call from the manager with whom you have just interviewed for a promising job after months of unemployment. “The job is yours. When can you start?” “Today!” you exclaim, but what you want to tell him is, “it's a miracle.” We live in the presence of miracles every day. Sometimes we recognize them and many times we do not. God speaks to us in the language of miracles and there are times when God has to take drastic measures to get our attention.

That is what happened to our friend Zechariah. I imagine if he loved Elizabeth as any good husband would he had prayed and hoped for a child for many years. Perhaps he had resigned himself to being fatherless, trusting as a faithful servant of God that it was God's will. They made a life together that did not include children, despite their longing and disappointment. Then out of the blue, an angel appears to Zechariah. Why now? We will never know. It is all part of God's plan. He learns that he will become a father and that he is to name his child John. This child is ordained to do great things. Now Zechariah is a sensible man. He understands that having a child at Elizabeth's age seems impossible. He doubts and questions God. However the angel tells Zechariah that all things are possible with God.

Then God does a strange thing to Zechariah. When he voices his disbelief, God silences him, literally. He takes away Zechariah's voice. He renders him mute. What a gift. You may not think so at first. I suspect there may be a wife or two among us who would have welcomed a silent partner during her pregnancy. There are so many questions, well intentioned of course, and so many decisions to make. Allowing a pregnancy to unfold in holy silence is a miraculous thing. Some people process their anxiety in silence, other folks, the extroverts among us, yammer their way through anxiety. I suspect God knew enough about Zechariah to understand that his yammering would get in the way of his pondering. So he made it easy for him. He wanted Zechariah to simply sit in the presence of this miracle. So God got his attention by taking away his voice.

God invites us to join Zechariah and Elizabeth on their journey. The silencing is part of the miracle. We doubt, we wonder, we laugh, and we dismiss the messages God sends to us until God finds a way to get our attention. Women are more likely to receive silence not as a curse, but a gift. Many women are comfortable being in a circle of silence. In fact, in a world filled with questions coming at us from every possible direction, silence is often a cherished gift. I meet every six weeks with a group of clergywomen. We call our gathering a wisdom circle. We carve out an hour and a half together and a significant portion of that time is spent in silence. For some people it may seem odd to take a portion

of such precious time and spend it in silence. We light a candle and someone may pose a question to contemplate and then we sit. It is such a blessing. None of us would likely do this for ourselves. We fill our days with teaching and talking and writing and answering emails and we neglect our need for silence. In this sacred silence God visits us and sometimes out of the silence we can speak. Other times, we remain quiet, depending upon how the spirit is leading us that day. Silence was a gift to Zechariah, whether he understood it that way or not.

The gift that Elizabeth receives is a visit from Mary. There is nothing as holy as two pregnant women sharing the miracle of birth. Mary journeys to Elizabeth because somehow she knows that is where she belongs. Elizabeth welcomes the companionship because she knows that only Mary will understand what she is going through. They are miracle bearers and who else would understand that? Elizabeth should not be in her condition but is overjoyed. Mary should not be in her condition and she is perplexed. Every pregnant mother shares both these emotions, but Mary is unique. What on earth is God thinking? Why on earth does God choose a young woman from Nazareth of all places to be the God-bearer. Mary surrenders to God's will however, she does not fully comprehend what she has been chosen to do. Elizabeth surrenders too and like Mary, she does not fully understand what God has done or will do through her.

Their surrender is a miracle too. They are from two different generations and yet they trust so completely. Anything is possible with God. This is not just what the angel has told them. They believe it with all their heart. This is not about them. This is about God. They have been chosen to shepherd the miracle, to bring it to life, but it is not something either of them had planned or chosen. Having said yes, their lives are about to change in ways they can not imagine. When we find ourselves in the presence of something that amazing, something we know is completely God's doing, we can either retreat in fear or we can surrender. That does not mean that we are instantly filled with a blissful sense of peace. God may have to resort to drastic measures to get our attention for us to discover God knows what God is doing after all. Most of us would respond with a whole litany of objections. I am not worthy of this. God got it wrong. This makes no sense at my age. Why will my son, whom I have not even seen, be so important to God? All things are possible with God. Let go of the fear and doubt and slip into the wonder. God will take care of the rest.

In those times of pregnant possibility it is best to not be alone. Elizabeth had Zechariah and even in his silence, he was all she needed. She also had Mary, who was connected to her in ways only another mother could be. We are not meant to go through this birthing process alone. Despite the odd circumstances of Mary's delivery, she will never be alone. As God did with Mary and Elizabeth, God will always send people to accompany us on our journeys, to help us discover what we need, even if we can not articulate that for ourselves. Sometimes that companion will confirm for us what we already sense. Mary had surrendered her will to God but had told no one what was happening to her. However, without saying a word, Elizabeth knew. God did not have to reveal it to her in a dream or send Gabriel for another visit. She just knew and then in a kind of birthing ritual, she proclaims this knowledge to Mary. In case Mary was having second thoughts,

once Elizabeth joins her in her joy there is no going back. Now, she has nothing to fear. Elizabeth will be with her and then it will be time for Joseph to take his place in the drama. Nothing is impossible with God. We know this to be true.

There is just a little time left. We feel like that anxious mom, ready for our time of waiting to end yet wondering what exactly will happen once does. I know that God is producing miracles in our very midst. Perhaps God is saying to us, silence yourselves+ and prepare to receive them. They will come, in God's time and the way God intends it. I invite you to find a trusted companion who will journey with you. There is no greater gift you can give or receive. This is the season of wonder and bliss. May you receive a full measure of both. God has done great things with us. Holy is God's name. May it be so. Amen