

Luke 1: 5...80

As I sat down to begin writing this sermon the other day, a little burst of wind sent a swirl of snow up onto the porch of my house to rattle the panes of the sidelights at my door. And even as I'm speaking now, the kind of blizzard that we call a nor'easter is whistling around my home on the coast of New England. Meanwhile, as many of you are watching this, the solstice is at hand in our little corner of the universe. A turning is in progress: the winds of change are at the door. A new time is blowing in; something's up.

"In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a town in the hill country of Judea..." (Luke 1:39). The original Greek actually says something more like, "...Mary rose up and hurried..." She set off like a breath of wind – something new blowing in – the leading edge of a change in the weather of the world.

This squall of spirit is part of one of the most familiar and beloved stories in all of scripture: Mary's encounter with the Angel Gabriel and the tempest of news he landed at her doorstep. "Greetings, Mary," Gabriel had said; "Don't be afraid ... You have found favor with God ... You will conceive and bear a child..." Probably it didn't take the eyes of an angel to see how the news rattled the young girl. But somehow I've never thought to pay attention to one little detail in the story: as soon as the angel had departed from her, Mary rose up and went quickly. I never noticed before the whoosh of her movement, the energy of her errand. Was it the fear that Gabriel evidently read in her eyes – or the dismay that she read in Joseph's, when she broke the news to him? Luke's gospel doesn't say much of anything about Joseph, other than that they were engaged but not yet married. But if we open the narrative door to Matthew's version of these events, a cold front blows in: Joseph doesn't take the news well. Maybe the sudden journey was necessary to make the space the two of them needed to weather the change. Or was it just the sheer scope of what Mary was now carrying? Was it one of those times when you hear yourself say "yes" and then, later, think, *what have I done?* Did it take Mary a minute to replay the angel's message in her mind before she could hear that other piece of the tidings: "Look, your cousin Elizabeth has also conceived a child, even in her dotage; she's already six months along." Maybe just the mention of the name Elizabeth was the gust of wind on which Mary could ride to a door that she knew would open to her, and a wise, weary face that would break into smiles, and arms to make a safe harbor for this swelling news of a new season in each of their lives, and in the whole world's life. In this season at First Pres we're noticing the well-labeled dreamers who prepare the way for the advent of God: Isaiah with his visions of a world re-landscaped by peace and justice ... John in the wilderness with his wild talk of a solstice of hearts turning back toward the Light ... Mary with her courageous response to the news she got from an angel, and Joseph with his belated acquiescence to his own angel-dream ... Anna and Simeon imagining the consolation of

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the world. . . In this season of dreamers when we are aspiring to be, ourselves, like those who dream, it's easy to overlook Elizabeth. The young always have the edge in stories about changing the world; so Mary rises up and heads full of news and full of God to a certain house. . .but let's not overlook the dreamer who's waiting to greet her there.

“Blessed are you, and blessed is this child who is of the essence of you,” were Elizabeth's first words of greeting – and the story says that she cried them out before Mary had even said a word about the gust of news she was riding, or why she needed to come. Elizabeth knew what she was seeing – knew it because she had the kind of heart that is tuned to the joys or sorrows of others; that's what it means to “live blamelessly according to the commandments” (Luke 1:6). And she knew it, too, because she was carrying her own news, her own tempest, her own improbable, impossible child – and had felt an inner earthquake of recognition of the intervention of God in their lives, a wide-awake dream. “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord,” Elizabeth said – and though she said it to Mary, she felt the blessing fall on her own head too, the blessing raining down on them together in the dooryard of a little house in the hill country of Judea, with the weather of history changing all around them, all within them – a front of blessing moving through.

It's easy (especially for a man) to lose sight of what brought them together, what they recognized in each other – laughing there in each other's arms, or weeping, or wondering, or whatever they did, with Mary about to burst into song right there on the front porch. This is a story about the overturning of humiliation – a story about gathering up your dignity and making haste to leave behind the shaming, mocking, other-ing, cat-calling disapproval of those who think they know who you should be. This is a story about riding the tempest of good news from God into the reassuring embrace of someone else who will understand. Someone who will go through it with you – weather it alongside of you – give you shelter in the sweet arbor of their company. When Elizabeth first realized what God was up to in her own life, she had said, “See what the Lord has done – how the Lord has *looked with favor* on me and taken away the disgrace I have endured among my people” (Luke 1:25). And when Gabriel first spoke to Mary, what he said was, “You have *found favor* with God.” Two women who knew how it felt to be looked upon with disgust by “their people” and then how it felt to be looked upon with favor by God, now knew that the thing they most needed was to look with favor on each other, to bask in the healing holiness of companionship.

I'm not sure I've ever had the temerity to preach about something about which I have less experience, to which I have less access, than the solidarity of women – particularly in the course of carrying a child. What I know more about, in this culture of ours, is the way many men are trained to be men by honing the arts of humiliation, or practicing the disciplines of emotional separation. And I can see – we all can see – how, in this culture of ours, we are actually at a moment of needing to decide whether we can simply opt out of the struggles that others are enduring – to decide whether mocking or other-ing or shaming them is just going to be part of business as usual. Evidently it's debatable whether, as a matter of both principle and national character, we feel any obligation at all to offer our collective systemic financial help to those who can't afford health care, or food, or a place to live. We're deciding, I guess, whether or not the shelter of each other is part of our calling as human beings. And all the while the blustering winds of a changing season are rattling the panes beside our door.

The Reverend Dr. Richard E. Spalding, Interim Pastor

The thing about being looked upon with favor is that it's catching.

Maybe Mary makes haste because, in the midst of everything she has to worry about, she feels the favor of God looking at her and suddenly needs, more than anything, to look at somebody else that way. Maybe the wind kicked up by the wings of the departing angel blows her overflowing dreams in the direction of a certain house in the hill country of Judea where there is someone who she knows will understand, someone who will go through it with her – whatever “it” turns out to be. Maybe, for all we know, it was the company of that dreamer Elizabeth that made the whole Incarnation possible. Maybe Mary was able to say to the angel, “Let it be,” because in that moment her mind raced (as her body would soon follow) to the one she knew she could count on. Maybe she ran to Elizabeth just so she could ask, “Did I dream that?” – and then be surprised when Elizabeth said, “I was going to ask you exactly the same thing.”

“How blessed is the woman who believed” (Luke 1:45), Elizabeth said, looking her cousin up and down – using the same word Jesus would eventually speak, on that hillside, to those astonished people who probably knew something about humiliation themselves, and so could hardly believe their ears at first when they heard him say “blessed are the poor, the meek, the ones who mourn, the ones who make peace, the ones who are persecuted...” (Matthew 5:1ff.) What happened to Elizabeth turned out to be happening to Mary, too; and what happened to Mary was going to happen to everybody: God was going to look with favor on all of them, blessing on all of them, through the eyes of that child of Mary's, and then use favor in the eyes to start dismantling the edifices of humiliation brick by brick. What happened to them could happen to anyone – as it began to happen during the short earthly life of that child of Mary's and is happening still among those who are trying to let themselves go where he calls them. It would happen to anyone, everyone, who decided to accompany each other through the changing weather: the blustering squalls of the tyrants and the breaths of fresh air as a new front of love with a chance of justice rolls through. Accompaniment is a sacrament – an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Accompaniment, after all, is what God came to earth in Jesus to do – and to teach us to do.

And though I'm a man and have no right to say this, I can't help wondering whether what you feel when you know that you are accompanied – what you feel when you know that God has looked upon even you with favor – what you feel when you know you are not alone – might be a little bit what it feels like when life itself leaps up inside of you.

The Reverend Dr. Richard E. Spalding