

God is in the Midst of This

*“Then the LORD said,
“I have observed the misery of my people...
I have heard their cry...
Indeed, I know their sufferings...”*

Today I do not quote from Jesus to begin with—as I normally do.

Today, the 4th Sunday of Advent, as we follow the story, Jesus, the incarnation of God who will grow up to give us the living instruction of how to attain a full and joy-filled life and be at peace is just a twinkle in God’s eye.

The scripture I quoted is not in our readings today. It is from Exodus 3:7. But actually, it is. From 2 Samuel:

“...since I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day...I have moved about among the people...

I will appoint places for my people...and will plant them.”

From the Song of Mary:

“He has shown mercy... has shown strength...has cast down the mighty...has filled the hungry...has come to the help of his servant...”

From Romans: “To the God who is able to strengthen you...”

God hears the cries of his creation, and God acts. But we often miss God’s action because WE are not paying attention. WE are too busy listening to our own wailing to notice.

Let’s go back now and remember the context of the times in which Jesus was born.

We don’t know the exact age of Mary. But we do know she was likely in her early teens and betrothed since girlhood to Joseph—as with most girls in her culture. The world around Mary was oppressive. Though there was no specific plague in Mary’s time, disease and death were a part of everyday life. Mortality rates were very high; the average life expectancy of a male in Palestine was about 29 years. There was great financial hardship and hunger was prevalent. There was no middle class—just the poor and the rich. The poor still had to pay taxes which were 3-fold: tax to Caesar, tax to Herod, and tax to the temple. The judicial system was arbitrary at best; violence of all natures was not a stranger to “law enforcement”. Practicing their religion was tolerated by the Roman government, but only as long as it did not contradict Roman law.

I imagine all this would be a heavy weight on any young girl's mind in any time period. I also imagine Mary was typical of the girls her age in the Jewish culture of her era. We know Mary was Jewish, but we can also assume she was a devout Jew because her uncle Zachariah was a priest, so Mary would have accepted her station in life and would have dutifully prepared to become Joseph's wife.

Despite that, her song tells us that she yearned for the life that she was told over and over again God had promised to his people. She may have prayed silently or aloud as she drew water from the well, as she helped knead bread, or stoked the fire. She may have cried sometimes because life was so harsh.

I think what she did not do, was give up hope. In the midst of all that oppression and hardship, God appears to her through the Angel Gabriel and affirms that her hope is not in vain. There is a BUT though.

Mary must respond to the affirmation of hope with her willingness to carry that hope to the world. She must carry God's son, nurturing him with her body, until the time for her to give birth to him—then giving him who would carry that hope to the world for more generations than she would ever know.

Coming back to the present, is our world today that much different than Mary's world?

We are in the midst of the worst surge of the Covid-19 Pandemic since Americans first heard of it some 10 months ago. I have had the privilege of preaching at St. Barnabas 4 times in those 10 months. Most of the sermons I have heard during this time have mentioned it one way or another, so I made a point each time **not** to mention The Pandemic. Today is different.

We are also in the midst of the most difficult transition of political power in this country any of us has witnessed. As I said about The Pandemic, I avoided mentioning the political divide in our country in my sermons. Today is different.

It is time for me to speak about our times in light of our Gospel story of the annunciation to Mary

Every day, I do listen to the news. Some days it is nearly unbearable as it is the same, the same, the same, for all these months the same grim news. People are tired, angry, and feeling helpless and hopeless. Yes there are some who are doing their best to cheer us up, but the weight of the worsening of The Pandemic and the hateful political rhetoric overshadows these stories of cheer. The fact that The Pandemic is not only killing people physically, but also financially is so overwhelming that people are literally in the street begging for help. Government authorities make decisions that help on the one hand, but harm on the other. There is chaos all around us. And people are wringing their hands and crying out.

Yet the voice of God is speaking to us, giving us hope. Do we hear it?

Almost 12 years ago, at the behest of Bishop Mary, Rev. Paul Edwards of Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Fullerton came here to St. Barnabas. He gave a one-day workshop for our deanery on radical grace. I will never forget that day, or him. Of all that he taught and shared with us, what I hold most dear is the image of God present at all times.

I know some of you attended that workshop. Do you remember that image?

Christians! We know we are not helpless. We know hope is eternal.

I have been moved by the cries of the nurses who are exhausted and have put their own lives on the line by tending to those with Covid-19. I have even prayed with some of them.

I have been moved by the cries of the small business owners who have already lost their businesses, are about to, or are worried they might—who have decried the government shut down mandate for fear of losing their livelihood and ability to provide for their families.

I have been moved by the volunteer workers in shelters for the homeless who are often forgotten about in thinking of those who put their lives on the line for others.

I have been moved by the coming together of communities to help those facing food insecurity.

I have been moved by the outcry of the black citizens in this country who are suffering all of the above with the added issues of our white vs people of color racial culture.

I have been moved by those in government positions who are willing to put their own reputation and position on the line by speaking out for justice rather than going along with their particular party preference platform.

Oh, and so much more.

I have been moved by our own church. In the midst of conflict about the doctrine of how to be Church in this Covid-19 atmosphere, we are still bringing the worship and community to the people.

All these, All of These! Like Mary, were doing what they do, are doing what they do in the culture they are in and yet, said, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.”

Did they know it was the hope of God within them that caused them to perform in the capacity they did? Maybe not. But, you see, God is always with us. Even when we are not paying attention; even when we are crying out and can only seem to hear our own wailing.

God is here.

For those of you who were at the Paul Edwards workshop, did you remember the image he gave us? A few minutes ago, I lit a candle. There are other candles that have been flickering from the beginning of the service. How many of you, were so focused on those candles, particularly the one I lit, that you remember very little if anything that has been said or has taken your attention?

So true isn't it? You knew the candles were lit, but you were not giving them your attention. You were distracted by your surroundings—the chatter around you.

Well, family: That is where God is—in the midst of our chatter and our distraction; always there lighting our way whether we are conscious of it or not. God is doing marvelous things and we just need to stop our wailing for a while to listen and see and we will know as Mary did.

As you are making final preparation for your celebration of the birth of God's son, Jesus, I want to give you the gift of my favorite prayer, which I think we so need in this difficult time to remind us that we will get through all this—all of this darkness, and sadness.

Let us Pray.

Holy God, You are always with us;

Open our eyes to your presence.

God of faithful surprises, throughout the ages you have made known your love and power in unexpected ways and places. May we daily perceive the joy and wonder of your abiding presence. (Daily Prayer for All Seasons, Church Publishing, Page 121)

God is with us!