

Signals of the Spirit

We are like Elizabeth and Mary. We are ordinary people living daily doing our ordinary best. In our story for today a God moment happens, God's message is spoken and God's Spirit confirms it. Today Elizabeth and Mary are characters on the stage of God's movement in the world. They cannot help but rejoice as they suddenly see God's favor towards them.

Our story for this morning begins with Mary traveling quickly. She has just been visited by the angel Gabriel and told of the conception by the Holy Spirit. She has just learned that her future includes being the mother of the One who will be known as of the Son of God. She has just heard she is to bear this One and name him Jesus, for his purpose is to save and his kingdom will have no end. Could it be that the prayers of her people for an end to power grabs were being answered now and that she was being called to action?

The angel had also delivered unbelievable news that her older cousin is now in the sixth month of her pregnancy. Her cousin had prayed for years to be able to conceive and have children only to have those prayers go unanswered. Instead she had learned to live with a deep sadness. The news of the angel was an unexpected reversal of fortunes. No wonder we read that Mary is racing across the countryside. Without the benefit of immediate electronic transmission of video or photos or texts, the only way to find out the truth of this incredible news was to see her cousin face to face.

But this story is not just about improbable pregnancies. It is about a new Lord and Savior of the earth! It is about the reversals of life that will be evident when God's favor for all changes the landscape. Life for many of God's chosen people had been less than satisfactory for some time. Their troubles were a mixture of self-inflicted corruption and the oppressive weight of the latest empire over them.

God's chosen people had squandered an opportunity to practice the righteousness and mercy that God had designed for them. Instead of the priestly families making sure that all had what they needed, some in leadership positions made a grab for wealth and power and neglected the poor. The ruler/priests and their families began to compete for power rather than live for the sake of their neighbors. Such corruption made them weak as a society and susceptible to the next great world power to come in and become their overlords, the Roman Empire.

Under Roman rule greed and injustice continued and was multiplied. Rome issued their heavy taxes. The Temple tithe was still expected to be paid but the double taxes drove many average people into great debt. Rich Jewish families took advantage of this buying up properties of the common folk, increasing their struggles. Instead of remaining as landowners, the common folk became tenants paying rent. Instead of managing properties they became laborers. When the debt was too much, they were forced into prison or slavery. The downward spiral finally found some begging for food.

Under Roman rule the Emperor Augustus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, was known as 'Commander Caesar, Son of the Divine.' But Augustus' notion of divinity was nothing like the one true God and creator of the universe. Augustus was a conqueror, willing to crush anyone and only using people to create a larger empire. Interdependency was a foreign idea to him. This way of holding others in contempt began to infect those of the Jewish priestly families who began to collaborate with Rome so that they could maintain their power and riches.

The rich became richer and the poor became poorer. In the land which was now filled with injustice and division, there were the faithful poor who still trusted in God's promises. They would cry out to God in prayer that God would send a prophet like Elijah and a king like David, someone who would rule with justice and mercy forever.

Elizabeth and Zechariah likely prayed those prayers. Mary and Joseph surely saw the corruption and divisions in society first hand. When Mary heard the angel's message, she heard more than a change in her personal life, she heard of the longing of her people and the beginning of the answer to their prayers. God's favor is pushing beyond the boundaries that society has fixed. With anticipation, Mary began to live into the new time before it was completely present.

When Mary reached Elizabeth she could see her cousin really was pregnant. The message of the angel was taking shape, "For nothing will be impossible with God."

When Mary greeted Elizabeth, the baby inside her cousin leaped with joy. It was a signal of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit in John recognized who the unborn child in Mary's womb was. God had given unbelievable grace to Mary and Elizabeth but it was just the beginning of what God would do. They are unlikely agents for the unrolling of God's kingdom being female. In addition, one is too old and the other has no experience and yet they are clearly favored by God.

They also respond to the grace given to them. Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, calls Mary blessed, not because she conceived, but because she believed, she trusted that the ancient prophecies would be fulfilled. Elizabeth recognizes the agency of Mary. Mary had responded to the angel's message appropriately. Faith, or trust, in the divine promises is something that is not simply held in the heart, it is something that others can discern. It is something that others notice. It is something that is visible.

We live in a time when division is again on the rise. The news of the times are that the rich are getting more prosperous while those in poverty see little in gains which can pull them up and out of their current state. There is much sadness, addiction, displacement, and injustice. Is God still at work in the midst of this? Does God hear the prayers of people in need?

In December at St. John's I was struck by some signals of the Spirit. During the Adult Education hour the Anderson's came to talk about JONAH, a local group organized in 2007 with the purpose of building community and building capacity to address root causes of poverty and injustice. They spoke of building relationships with the immigrant community through one-on-one interactions. They talked about the outstanding police force in Eau Claire which is explicit

about protecting and serving all people no matter their status. This group which regularly gathers faith leaders of the Chippewa Valley together to address issues facing the community is surely God at work, carrying out the kingdom goals and moving the area towards the peaceable kingdom. The question is, will this presentation enliven someone to not only pray, and not only learn, but also to work for justice in new ways?

Another signal of the Spirit was hearing that Eau Claire is a hub for the mission of Lutheran Social Services. Karla Spies informed us of the many services provided by LSS from restorative justice services to senior housing to adoption to individualized community support; the ministry that LSS provides is abundant. They like JONAH, fill in the gaps where other government services are lacking. Surely God is at work providing healing and life in LSS.

I came across an article which tells a story of divine love although no divine figure is ever mentioned. It is the story of the Pinky Swear Foundation which a father started up following the death of his son. Mitch (Chepokas) was 9 years old and sick with cancer in the hospital when before his last Christmas he asked his Father to take him to the bank so he could withdraw all his savings, \$ 6,000. He then returned to the hospital, having divided the money, and slipped the gifts under doors or under pillows of other kids fighting cancer. He wanted the kids and their families to know they were not alone.

Later he had his father pinky swear that they would do it again next year. His father kept the promise, raising funds and seeking out families who suddenly needed help when their worlds were turned upside down by the diagnosis of cancer. Some received rent money, others money to buy food or medications. At the end of treatment Pinky Swear offers a fun weekend as the child and family move toward healing.

Since 2003, Steve Chepokas has raised \$ 15.5 million, stating that's not enough. We need to give more away. I am not satisfied, and I never will be.

Though religion is never mentioned and there is no talk of God, I cannot help but hear the voice of God speaking. Especially in this world where there is division, sadness, addiction, displacement and injustice. I imagine the voice of God saying, "It's not enough. We need to give more away. I am not satisfied, and I never will be until all have what they need."

We are like Elizabeth and Mary. We are ordinary people living daily doing our ordinary best. In the living of our days, a God moment happens, God's message is spoken and God's Spirit confirms it. Today we are characters on the stage of God's movement in the world. We are ones who are praying. We are ones whose eyes are opened by the Spirit to see what God is doing. We are ones who can rejoice at the sight of those whom God favors.