

## The One Of Peace – Niquita Hohm

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:46b-55; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45

Perceiving, proclaiming and praising, women light the way through the end of our Advent season. Although we enter the house of Zechariah, he is temporarily silenced, so we therefore get a rare scene of dialogue and action coming only from women and children.

We begin after Mary gets the big news. And she runs. She's not running from (because remarkably, she has already accepted her unbelievably large role in God's unfolding drama); no, she is rather running towards a friend who is a little farther along on the journey. Mary does not yet have any embodied knowledge of her tiny babe, she only knows because she *believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord*. So she runs to Elizabeth, who can already feel the flutters of her tiny prophet. And while Mary isn't running from her role in bearing God's son, she may indeed be running from those who would shame her, if not threaten her life. She runs to Elizabeth, the older, wiser woman in her life who knows the pain of society's shaming glare and has reached the other side of it, at least in some respects.

When you're expecting a baby, countless people tell you, "Get ready! Everything is about to change..." A couple natural responses to this are: "Duh." And also: "What am I to do with that knowledge?" On the other side of the birth of my own baby, I can understand the impulse behind it, and the truth within it, but what is one to do practically with the knowledge that absolutely everything changes? What preparations can be made for your world turning upside down? And yet, that's precisely what we are all doing as Christians, in the moment of our baptism, in other moments of remembering and reckoning with that baptism, in the moments of singing with Mary of God's great upheaval, and in so many moments in between. Just as we have been this Advent season, we prepare for everything to change with the arrival of *the one of peace*.

So Mary runs, but Elizabeth is there ready to greet Mary. She gathers and enfolds her, she welcomes and blesses her. In the blessing, Elizabeth is calling Mary into being as a mother. Like Mary, one of the first things I did in finding out that I was expecting my own baby was to run to someone a little farther along in the journey. One of my closest friends, a mom of two young boys, listened, laughed and cried hopeful, joyful tears with me. We listened to songs about babies on a long car ride, and even as that baby the size of a poppy seed was growing inside, I was growing into who I would be as a mother by being in communal celebration with my friend. In other areas of our lives, too, this is the way we grow into being. Just as the Trinity's dance of togetherness demonstrates who our God is, we become who we are by the strengthening of the threads woven between us.

When we, like Mary, have news that causes us to move with haste, to whom are we running? And like Elizabeth, are we opening our arms to embrace those who run to us for a blessing? Intergenerational community is what we are created for; as littler and younger people come to us to be filled, we with haste turn and run to those who've journeyed longer to fill us back up too. We offer each other, as the following poem by Jan Richardson names it:

### **A Blessing Called Sanctuary**

You hardly knew

how hungry you were  
to be gathered in,  
to receive the welcome  
that invited you to enter  
entirely—  
nothing of you  
found foreign or strange,  
nothing of your life  
that you were asked  
to leave behind  
or to carry in silence  
or in shame.

Tentative steps  
became settling in,  
leaning into the blessing  
that enfolded you,  
taking your place  
in the circle  
that stunned you  
with its unimagined grace.

You began to breathe again,  
to move without fear,  
to speak with abandon  
the words you carried  
in your bones,  
that echoed in your being.

You learned to sing.

But the deal with this blessing  
is that it will not leave you alone,  
will not let you linger  
in safety,  
in stasis.

The time will come  
when this blessing  
will ask you to leave,  
not because it has tired of you  
but because it desires for you  
to become the sanctuary  
that you have found—  
to speak your word  
into the world,  
to tell what you have heard  
with your own ears,  
seen with your own eyes,  
known in your own heart:

that you are beloved,  
precious child of God,  
beautiful to behold,\*  
and you are welcome  
and more than welcome  
Here.

—Jan Richardson (from *Circle of Grace*)

Mary and Elizabeth's community stretches far across time and space as well. The content and shape of Elizabeth's blessing for Mary brings to mind much older blessings for Jael and Judith. New Testament scholar Brittany Wilson notes, "Elizabeth's greeting, 'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb,' is strikingly reminiscent of the prophet Deborah's praise of Jael, 'Blessed is Jael among women . . . among tent-dwelling women most blessed' and of Uzziah's praise of Judith, 'Blessed are you, daughter, by the Most High God above all women on earth.'" These similarities serve to connect Mary to other women in Israel, and to show Jesus' ongoing relationship with Israel. But although the phrasing is similar, the contrast comes through the way in which each woman was fulfilling God's plan. Mary's blessedness is re-visioned in surprising and startling ways. Though Jael and Judith are praised for their violent conquering of Israel's enemies, Mary is blessed for fulfilling God's plan through non-violent means. Mary willingly places herself in a precarious position to be a peacemaker in a world of violence. And as we will of course see throughout their lives, both mother and son reject violence. Jesus' infancy narrative is saturated with this vision of peace, as the angels proclaim to the shepherds peace on earth, and Zechariah's prophecy speaks of the one who will guide our feet in the way of peace.

Like Mary, we're called to hear and act on the message proclaimed by the Prince of Peace. But as we know, that's no easy task. There's a danger in joining that vision. Mary was signing on for all the moments of motherhood, including the painful ones. Even as the babies leap for joy in their mother's wombs, we who know the rest of the story know the fate that awaits them, being ones who tread the way of peace.

It's dangerous for everyone. It's obviously risky for the mighty to sing Mary's song. Which is of course why they avoid it or even ban it being publicly proclaimed, as has happened a couple times throughout history. Once, for example, in the '80s, when the impoverished masses of Guatemala were moved by it to hope in God's preferential love and care for the poor, the government banned any public recitation of Mary's song. But again, it's more immediately dangerous for the downtrodden. It's obviously dangerous for the backlash from those seated comfortably too high. But the backlash comes when they sense the power. Mary's song of liberation is testifying to the same world-transforming God that Miriam and Hannah proclaimed before her. And song is too powerful a vessel to be ignored as it bears witness to the God with the oppressed. Those who dare to sing these world-upturning songs will then need a blessing called sanctuary. Will we be there ready to offer it?

Mary beckons us to join her in her song. What words have you found to express the radical, revolutionary hope of the Messiah you carry? And who will you invite to join in your song?