

In the late 1980s, political activist and social justice songwriter, Tracy Chapman, sang that talking about a revolution sounds like a whisper. The song referred to people in the welfare lines and on unemployment, but the lyrics continued, “Poor people gonna rise up and get their share, Poor people gonna rise up and take what’s theirs ... cause finally the tables are starting to turn.” While the song was not a huge hit when it was first released, it was reprised as a rallying song in recent years during the Tunisian and Arab revolutions. For Chapman, talking about a revolution sounds like a whisper because nobody listens to the poor and the dispossessed. It sounds like a whisper because the lowly are easy to ignore, but our gospel reading for today tells us something quite different. In these passages from Luke, we actually hear that talking about a revolution can be quite loud. It can take shape as a hymn of praise formed on the lips of an unlikely couple of pregnant women, and it can proclaim a God who shatters all expectations of normal life. It can amplify the work God has done and will continue to do in the lives of those who trust in the promised salvation.

The text today picks up in the middle of two important birth announcements. First Gabriel has visited Zechariah in the Temple to inform him that his wife, Elizabeth, will bear them a son. Zechariah responds with disbelief asking for proof, and as punishment for his lack of faith, he is rendered mute. How frustrating it must have been to have good news and a great story but no way to share it.

When Elizabeth learns of her pregnancy, she responds with gratitude and self-consciousness as she remains in seclusion for the first five months. Some scholars speculate that she goes into seclusion because pregnancy at an advanced age such as hers might have been unseemly. Yet, Elizabeth, herself proclaims gratitude at her condition. This promise of an heir gives her status and fulfillment that were missing in her life.

I wonder if her seclusion came from fear of losing her child. The early stages of pregnancy can be a time of great uncertainty. We do not know how many times Elizabeth might have hoped she was pregnant only to learn that she was not. The ecstasy of pregnancy can be intoxicating, yet the grief of miscarriage can be equally crushing. The hope and anticipation of longing for a child can become an exercise in cruelty when month after month, year after year, no viable pregnancy comes. Maybe it is better to remain in seclusion and wait it out than to face the indignity of a barren life. No doubt Elizabeth – just like Sarah and Hannah before her – had prayed for just this sort of blessing for years, but perhaps she and Zechariah had both given up hope that this dream would ever become a reality. So, when the day finally does come, perhaps Elizabeth is wary. This miraculous pregnancy has made her husband mute and Elizabeth cautious. There is good news to be shared, but Zechariah and Elizabeth are restrained in the telling of it. They are reduced to a whisper.

Gabriel delivers his next message directly to the mother in question. While relaying the news of her own pregnancy, the angel also tells the maiden Mary of her cousin’s similar state saying, “³⁶ And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. ³⁷ *For with God nothing will be impossible.*” We might infer from the gospel text that Mary was unaware of her cousin’s good news until her encounter with Gabriel. Perhaps this is God’s way of reminding Mary that she is not alone, that producing healthy boy babies in extraordinary circumstances is something the God of her people is known for. One has to wonder, though, did the news of Elizabeth’s pregnancy ease Mary’s own concerns about the months ahead? Did sharing the gift of life at the same time as Elizabeth give Mary the courage she needed to face her fate?

As soon as Gabriel departs from Mary, she goes “with haste” to Elizabeth. As Mary enters her cousin’s house, both Elizabeth and her son respond dramatically. John leaps with joy in his mother’s womb, and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. People can do amazing things under the influence of the Holy Spirit. I had a religion professor once who researched Holiness Christian communities in rural North Carolina, and in his work he encountered a church with a member who ran in the Spirit. When the worship was profound, and the Spirit came upon him, this man could not contain his energy and he

started to run. He ran laps around the church until the Spirit left him. A blessing of the Spirit can cause others to speak in tongues or faint dead away. At some churches, there are attendants on hand to care for people who become overtaken by the Spirit. They act like nurses, moving a person who has fallen out to safety – out of the aisle or stretched out onto a pew – and these people keep watch over the person affected until he or she returns to full consciousness. How comforting it must be to know that if the Spirit comes, there is a community on hand to care for those who encounter it. There is a community of believers to nurture it. There are people *keeping watch*.

The Holy Spirit gives Elizabeth the gift of boisterous joy, vocal praise, and knowledge of Mary's condition. This is where the whispering and reticence stops and the shouting begins. These two women become megaphones for God's glory and simultaneously foretell a divine revolution. At Mary's arrival Elizabeth "exclaims with a loud cry". The words used here suggest a really, really loud exclamation. Elizabeth welcomes Mary saying, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" Elizabeth shouts out with joy and praise about all that God has done for her and Mary and she does it loudly – she does it exuberantly, she does it publically. She enthusiastically sings God's praises and the praises of Mary. Perhaps Elizabeth had a lot of pent up joy that was just waiting to burst out. Regardless, she is the first person to note Mary's pregnancy and to recognize the significance of Mary's child.

But, wait – has Mary announced her own pregnancy yet? Is this news public? Remember, Mary has just received the message from Gabriel. She is still in the "silent phase" of her pregnancy – that first few months when couples often keep the news quiet just in case the worst happens. But, Elizabeth runs helter-skelter over Mary's secret because Mary's secret is good news for the whole world. She proclaims it at the top of her lungs – and not only does she announce Mary's pregnancy wildly and loudly to anyone within earshot, but she also proclaims the child's Lordship and she lauds Mary's faithfulness to God and God's promises saying, "⁴⁵Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." To paraphrase a holiday song, Elizabeth tells it *all* on the mountain, and Mary's response is not a harsh "SSHHHHH! We're not telling people yet." Rather her response is one of our tradition's most well-known songs of praise.

Mary's song is the Advent message of all that is to come with the birth of the Christ child. It is a song of thanksgiving and a promise of mercy and justice. Read in conjunction with Elizabeth's declaration, the Magnificat reminds those of us who have read ahead in the Biblical story of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, the beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed those who believe in the fulfilment of the Lord. Both the song and the scene contribute to the message to create a fuller picture of what the world can expect from this miracle: a challenge to the status quo, a voice for the voiceless, blessings on the lowly, and a new paradigm for the world. Mary and Elizabeth proclaim that the Lord is coming and that this Lord is one who will shatter all expectations of what it means to be holy and mighty. This gospel story and this timeless song combine to give us a preview of what to expect with the births of John and Jesus.

Through these births the world can expect great things. This story models for us the ushering in of a new age. It tells of the tables being turned toward revolution.

It is remarkable that the dialogue in this text is only between women. How often in the biblical narrative or in society at large do women carry all of the dialogue? And it is worth remembering that in the verses just prior to these Zechariah, a man, loses his voice. He is made mute while his wife is compelled to exclaim loudly. Mary and Elizabeth proclaim their praises with megaphonic amplification. They magnify the Lord of Israel not only through songs of praise but also through a loving relationship that is empowering and nurturing – a relationship in which God is glorified, and a relationship in which the norms are reversed. Men are silent and women speak. The elder woman reveres the younger. The lowly is lifted up. Mary remains with Elizabeth for three months, and there in the company of her kinswoman she finds, not judgment and derision at an ill-timed pregnancy, but acceptance and joy. Mary encounters a woman filled with the Holy Spirit and a relationship brimming with mercy. Elizabeth provides a nurturing environment for Mary and Jesus in their first trimester together.

And this is the way it will be in the kingdom of God: nurture, safety, justice and joy. All of this is what we can expect as we prepare for the coming of the Lord. We can expect that those who have been

silenced will be given a voice. We can expect that people who have been alienated will be knit together in inclusive love. We can expect that the tables of the money lenders will be overturned and the small, heart-felt gifts of widows will be cherished. We can expect that the proud will be scattered and the lowly lifted up. We can expect that vulnerability will be turned to strength and shame will be replaced with joy.

In this way, talking about a revolution sounds like two women sharing love for one another, love for their unborn children, and love for their Lord. Talking about a revolution sounds like a kind gesture given to a neighbor on a rough day. It sounds like a word of welcome given to an immigrant who feels like an alien. It sounds like comfort in the midst of grief. It sounds like a fair wage paid to a laborer. It sounds like a life redeemed lived by a released prisoner. It sounds like a successful surgery, a prayer answered, a gift shared, or any number of other small signs of the in-breaking of the kingdom.

This is what we see in Mary and Elizabeth and again in John and Jesus. I wonder if it is also what we see in one another. Do we, like Mary and Elizabeth, become a community of support trusting that God is coming to save us and set us free? Do our months of waiting and hoping become times of joy for us? Is our patience and prayerfulness rewarded with blessings from our Lord? Are we filled with the Holy Spirit and moved to exclaim loudly about the wonderful things God has done in our lives? Do we leap with joy at the presence of Christ? Do our souls magnify the Lord and rejoice in God our Savior, and do we always remember that with God, nothing is impossible?

What can we expect while we are expecting the messiah, the Christ child, Mary's holy baby? We can expect nothing short of a revolution. For we know along with Mary and Elizabeth, along with Gabriel, John and Jesus, that blessing abounds and that with God, nothing is impossible for those who believe that there will be a fulfilment of what the Lord has promised. Amen.