

Turning the World Around: Beginning at the End

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Luke 1:39-55
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Here we are again. It is Advent, and we are waiting.

Waiting is hard. At the end of the Magnificat, Mary's words emphasize the length of time that the world had been waiting—from the time of Abraham—for the news of the baby she was carrying in her womb.

It wasn't just a spur-of-the-moment event. It was the news the world had been longing for, for generations. It was the news for which all creation, ears to the ground, had been listening. It was the fulfillment of a promise, shaped by years upon years of waiting, in restless anticipation. It was the hope that the world had rested upon for generations: a time of reordering, when the lowly are lifted up, when the hungry are filled with good things, and when God's mercy is remembered.

As New Testament theologian Luke Timothy Johnson points out in his book *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Luke*, throughout this Gospel, Luke employs the use of speeches. He uses speeches to convey to the reader what might have been said, with respect to the speaker, and to interpret the larger narrative story for the reader.

Luke brings forward the stories and voices of women. In the Magnificat, Luke draws upon the tradition of "the great reversal," of things being made right for people who have been excluded from or injured by dominant culture and politics, a message echoed in Hebrew scriptures. In her speech, Mary outlines how God will reverse the state of the lowly, the hungry and the abused. God's mercy will be extended where the world has turned its back. Luke draws attention to setting things right toward God's mercy and love. In Mary's song, we hear hints of Jesus' later prophetic message.

When Mary received the news from God's messenger, she went quickly to her friend Elizabeth. She had to talk with someone. Luke describes Elizabeth's response to Mary's arrival and her news in verse 41: "For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy." I really like the description of Elizabeth's response to Mary in *The Message*. Elizabeth says, "The moment the sound of your greeting entered my ears, the baby in my womb skipped like a lamb for sheer joy."

I expect Elizabeth's response might have been something like what we experience when we receive news we really want to hear, but didn't expect to hear. Or, even like what we experience when we get news that is difficult or devastating. We feel it in our bones. Our muscles tense up. We feel a flutter in our hearts. We take a deep breath and hold it in, without even realizing that we are doing so. In these moments, someone reminds us to breathe.

We get mixed messages during the season of Advent. We tend to be busier this time of year than any other. It's the end of the year, coming to a close. We are working hard to wrap things up—both literally and figuratively. We might be looking back at the year behind us, thinking about what has happened, what we celebrate, what we mourn, what we've come through, how we might have done some things differently. But, the Christian calendar tells us: this is really the beginning; that we are to be waiting with expectation, preparing for Emmanuel, God With Us.

But often, we are distracted: making plans with family and friends. We might be buying gifts. We are cooking and baking. In addition, we continue doing all the regular work that doesn't get put on hold; the work that needs to be done. Our days are full and overflowing. Where do we find time to wait—to actually hold our breath in anticipation and expectation?

It's possible that we can carve out time to wait, that we can arrange our schedules for moments of quiet and solitude and meditation, that we can remember to do this in the fleeting quiet or still moments that we have in the early morning when we wake up or late in the evening before we go to sleep. But it seems that our tendency is to catch these moments when we can, often without regularity or intentional planning.

I have been doing a lot more intentional waiting over the past few months than I ever remember doing in my life. I started a new (very) part-time job at Mission Hospital this fall with the Pastoral Care Department as a Family Support Liaison. My main task is to be present with families who are (or may soon be) in a position to consider organ donation.

As you may infer from what I've just said, I don't get called to the hospital in times of joy and celebration. In the majority of situations, I am called at the terrible and painful times in people's lives, times that are worse than people ever imagine happening—when a family member or friend has experienced a catastrophic, life-threatening injury—strokes, heart attacks, drug overdoses, gun-shot wounds, unrecoverable brain injuries.

I am called in at the end of life, when conversations about withdrawal of life support take place, or when doctors are explaining to families that their family member is brain dead, that s/he is not going to recover. But there is a lot that happens between the time I am called in to meet with a family and the conversations about the end of life that I just named.

Now, before you start thinking, "Okay, Debbie Downer, what kind of Advent sermon is this?" let me tell you a little more about some of the waiting I have experienced and witnessed in these situations. It is true that I don't get called to celebrate births or miraculous recoveries from illnesses or trauma, but I have witnessed what I would call miracles.

I sit with parents who struggle to grasp the fact that their child will die before they do. I hear the stories about their children, the joy that their children brought to their lives, the heartache and worry that they have poured out over the years, knowing that they have done all that they could as parents. I wait and watch and pray with them, holding on to threads of hope that something will shift or change.

I sit with spouses who agonize over when to make a decision to withdraw life support—wanting desperately for their partner to remain here, while also knowing that their partner would not want to live with artificial support. They tell me the story about how they met their partner. They tell me what their partner cared about and loved.

I sit with brothers and sisters who have not spoken to each other in years, as they try to make a shared decision about the health care of a parent. I watch as they recognize their shared love for their parent, even if they cannot agree upon anything else.

I hear the stories of patients' lives from the people who love them—their struggles, their love and compassion, their anger, their mistakes, their celebrations, their fear, their depression, their deepest longings and dreams. I witness miracles in all of these conversations.

In my work at the hospital with people facing the most despairing and confusing time of their lives, I witness miracles when families and friends open their hearts and minds to the possibility that this ending may also hold an important beginning.

In particular, I witness miracles when families and friends open their hearts and minds to the possibility that this ending may also hold an important beginning. It takes the shape of a sister or brother making a decision to take better care of themselves. It takes the shape of an estranged child returning to a parent, received into open arms for the first time in years. It takes the shape of parents leaning into the trust and assurance that they did everything that was in their power to do to prevent their beloved child from the fate now facing him or her. It takes the shape of family members holding their breath in anticipation of conflict or anger, which ends up not taking place. These miracles are enough, in and of themselves.

When the conversation turns to organ donation, another beginning presents itself at the end. More miracles happen. In the midst of their deepest pain, confusion, and despair, families find a sense of hope, realizing that the end of the life of their partner, father, mother, sister, brother, son, or daughter could potentially offer life and quality of life to more than fifty people.

Now, not everyone agrees to organ donation, and not everyone qualifies for organ donation. But in the situations where there is openness to new life breaking forth, in the most unexpected and sometimes deeply painful and confusing places, miracles happen. Despair and anguish are not completely erased; grief and fear still remain present. But these feelings are tinged with a new hope: that the end offers new beginning.

I can't help thinking of Mary's song in some of these situations. In the Magnificat, we hear Mary's song of praise and adoration, thanksgiving for God looking upon her with favor. But there is a lot that we don't hear in her song.

We know the status of women in Mary's day. We know that for Mary to become pregnant while engaged to Joseph, with Joseph knowing that he was not the father of the child, would have put her in a very difficult situation. Would people believe that God had sent a messenger to her to announce that she would give birth to God's child—a child destined to bring hope to the world? What would happen to her? To Joseph? To the child? Would Joseph even want to marry her now?

I suspect that there were many more emotions under the surface of Mary's hope, excitement, courage, and song of joy. I wonder if Mary also felt like this was an ending in some ways—with feelings of uncertainty and fear and confusion. I wonder if this was part of Mary's conversation with Elizabeth, seeking the advice and solace of her friend, one with whom she could ask the questions: What is going to happen? Why is this happening to me?

Maybe at the deepest level of knowing, Elizabeth and Mary sensed the connection between their sons. John would prepare the way. Emmanuel, God With Us, would continue in the way—the way that would reverse the order of the world—the way that the world is never quite ready to embrace—the way that is costly and dangerous because it questions the structures and systems of power.

Maybe at the deepest level of knowing, Elizabeth and Mary sensed the arc of the stories of their children. Maybe they knew more than they wanted to know. But all that they could do was wait.

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It is into this time of waiting that we are invited. During a time that feels like an ending, when we are evaluating the year behind us, when we are busy with details and tasks, we are invited to consider that we might actually be at the beginning. We are invited to see afresh and anew. We are invited to wait and anticipate and prepare ourselves to be ready to receive God With Us.

We already know that receiving God With Us can be costly and dangerous, and it requires that we surrender and commit ourselves to the ongoing story of God's work in the world, to reverse the order and turn things around. We know a little more of the story than Mary and Elizabeth knew when Mary brought her news of her pregnancy, and Elizabeth's child "skipped like a lamb for sheer joy." We know that the world resists being turned around, that sometimes we feel like we are only seeing the ending.

But with this wider view of the story, I am reminded of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s quote, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Mary's song draws our attention to God's hope for the universe. In addition to King and Mary, we have witnessed many who have been able to live in the hope of what is promised, in anticipation that we will know and experience the justice and mercy and mystery of God with us in the world.

As we recall these and many other stories of courage, hope, and anticipation of the world turning around, may we all find ways to connect with the waiting, to be present in the waiting, and to be ready to participate with God in the world. Let us watch and wait and pray together—for the signs and wonders of God with us. Amen.