



December 2023: An Advent Reflection

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Grace and Peace to you, my sisters and brothers in Christ. I am Bill Gottschalk-Fielding, the Assistant to the Bishop and I'm delighted to share with you another reflection in our series, Together in Prayer.

Driving home from work the other day, after turning off the news which seemed all bad, I found myself remembering a night almost 28 years ago:

In my mind's eye I saw a tiny hand outstretched, too small and fragile to be grasped by my father-size hand. So, I laid my smallest finger across her tiny palm. Her infant body quivered at the sensation of this unfamiliar touch, but she already knew how to respond to love. Her little fingers slowly wound around my finger, and we enjoyed the first embrace of a father and child.

It is a beautiful memory, but what place does it have in a world filled with the ugliness of war and climate change and nasty politics? When you and I gather during the season of advent to remember the birth of Mary's baby, are we just indulging in sentimentality to distract us from the harsh realities recounted on news?

Let's turn to Scripture for some help with this.

(Luke 1:39-45 CEB)

Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

Mary and Elizabeth were no strangers to the world's harsh realities. Their daily lives were lived under Roman occupation, subject to the will and whims of pagan rulers. Into that world Elizabeth and Mary would give birth. Archaeologists and historians of the ancient world estimate the infant mortality rate in the 1st century was higher than 50%. More than half the children born in those days died before the age of one. The maternal mortality rate – the chances of a mother dying in childbirth – were little better. Make no mistake: Elizabeth and Mary knew harsh realities.

Yet, when we meet them in Scripture, they are full of love, joy, hope, and peace. Indeed, they experience these qualities viscerally, in their very bodies. Elizabeth tells Mary, "As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy" (Luke 1:44 CEB). Mary responds by breaking out in full-throated song: With all my heart I glorify the Lord! In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior (Luke 1:46,47 CEB).

What do these two women know about living in the midst of challenging times? What is the source of their confidence and hope?

To answer that question, Mary and Elizabeth would point us to the "little one" in Mary's womb. The presence of Jesus caused Elizabeth's child to leap and Mary to sing.

This same presence did not immediately erase the problems of the world. On that first Christmas morning, when Mary held her newborn child, the world remained a broken and dangerous place, as it remains today.

That much the evening news gets right.

But what the evening news misses, the Good News proclaims: the one Mary held also holds the whole world. For he is the one whom the prophet Isaiah called "Emmanuel," God-with-us and whom the Angel Gabriel said would be called "Son of God." He is the one Paul called "the image of the invisible God," and John said was the "Word made flesh."

To put it simply: because God is in Jesus, and Jesus is with us as one of us, we are not alone in facing any problem. In everything, in every place, with every person, in every situation, God in Jesus is with us.

As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans,

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39 NRSV).

The child we embrace this Christmas is the One who embraces the whole world, including you and me, with a hold that nothing can undo.

My dad, who turns 85 a few days before Christmas, has always told me: you can face any situation with a good friend at your side.

This is why Mary and Elizabeth could live in the midst of a crazy world with confidence and hope, in love, and joy, and peace. And this is why we can too.

Because in Jesus, we have a Friend who stands with us.

Let me end with a prayer I wrote for Christmas Eve services 30 years ago when I was blessed to serve the good people of the Trumansburg UMC:

Holy God, through the birth of a little baby, you have visited your people and set them free. Grant that we might throw open the doors of our hearts and invite you in. Give us grace sufficient to provide a comfortable place for you, not in the back rooms of our lives, but in those places where we live and move and have our being. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Advent and Christmas blessings on each of you, my friends.