

And Mary's reply to God's call as she journeys, understands that fear is characteristic of our response to God when God disrupts our lives. The journey of Advent is drawing to a close once again. The birthing is near. We have taken a brief and perhaps somewhat hasty journey, but we can be assured that God has been at work in us. The current gestation period is nearly over. What has changed for you? Have you noticed a shift within? Have you carried any doubts or fears? Has your heart leapt in new recognitions of God's presence?

For me, a number of encounters last week brought new revelations of the divine – a rest-home resident receiving the sacraments of Holy Communion & anointing for the first time; the privilege of sharing another resident's deep grief; a chance encounter in the city with a woman needing bread and margarine, and the opportunity to respond – the blessing was mine as I companioned her to the local supermarket and to her home. Simple journeys of the soul allow the Christ to be birthed yet again within us. Journeying with God can't help but change us.

However we understand the depths of today's gospel passage, the two women – Mary and Elizabeth -both miraculously with child – have a most powerful encounter. The revelation of the divine presence within and between them triggers profound joy and anticipation. They are further sensitized and opened to the reign of loving kindness and righteousness promised by the God of their ancestors. They recognise that they are full participants in that promise.

We have no way of knowing exactly what Mary knew. My guess is that like us, she knew just enough to get started. My guess is that the work of bearing God into the world involved ceaseless discovery and ongoing consent, just as it does today. My guess is that each trembling "yes" Mary whispered into God's heart, changed the world. As does ours. May we approach the manger with awe and simplicity, willing pilgrims, 'yes' on our lips, hearts ever-open to God's disruption. Amen.

Sunday 23 December 2018 Advent IV Yr C

Readings:

Micah 5:2-5a, Heb 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

Reflection

'Glory to God on high, God of power and might. You are my God. I can neither add to your glory nor take away from your power. Yet will I wait upon you daily in prayer and praise'

The words poured from the depth of my being as I knelt at the stone manger in the crypt of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem some years ago. It was the same prayer as was offered to God at the time of my ordination. Kneeling at the manger was such a profound moment. It had been quite a journey to this most holy site. A bus ride from Jerusalem to Bethlehem (stopping at a shepherds' field and cave on the way). Then a three-hour, snail-paced queue in an oppressively hot church, hundreds of pilgrims squashed together, praying that we wouldn't faint, and even questioning the sense and purpose of the journey.

Journeying with God can't help but change us! Have you noticed that? In fact, all journeys impact us – the people we meet, the challenges we face, the disruptions to our plans. (Those poor souls at Gatwick airport!).

As we reflected in Advent 1, on the circular route to Bethlehem, we heard: 'when your place of departure becomes also your place of arrival, and you know the place for the first time: What will have changed? What will you find?' (not drones I hope)

Today's gospel reading in Luke, following on as it does from the Annunciation, takes us once again on a literal journey with Mary to the home of her pregnant kinswoman Elizabeth: 'In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.' As is so often the

case with holy scripture, it is the gaps, the spaces, the reading between the lines and into the depths, that can leave us intrigued and wondering. Did the pregnant Mary's relocation begin as a banishment from her hometown, a convenient 'disappearance' allowing the dust (and Joseph's mind) to settle? Young unmarried women-with-child have suffered ostracism and contempt throughout patriarchal history.

Entering the story, I can't help but wonder what might have gone through Mary's head as she took that journey. Did she carry doubts and fears as well as a growing child? Was she in constant conversation with God? Did the divine Spirit fill her with strength and excitement, wonder and anticipation?..... or were there moments of panic and terrible aloneness? A popular Christmas song addressed to Mary asks what she knew when she consented to Gabriel's request: "*Mary, did you know that your Baby Boy would one day walk on water?*

Mary, did you know that your Baby Boy would save our sons and daughters?

*Did you know that your Baby Boy has come to make you new?
This Child that you delivered will soon deliver you.'*

Mary, did you know that your Baby Boy will give sight to a blind man?

Mary, did you know that your Baby Boy will calm the storm with His hand?

Did you know that your Baby Boy has walked where angels trod?

When you kiss your little Baby you kissed the face of God?

Mary did you know.. The blind will see. The deaf will hear. The dead will live again.

The lame will leap. The dumb will speak ..the praises of The Lamb.

Mary, did you know that your Baby Boy is Lord of all creation?

Mary, did you know that your Baby Boy would one day rule the nations?

Did you know that your Baby Boy is heaven's perfect Lamb?

The sleeping Child you're holding is the great "I Am"

And what about Elizabeth, the barren elder-woman, now six months through her own child's gestation, confined in her mute husband's home? (How peaceful that must have been!) It would seem that the womb of her soul was ripened in faithful anticipation during her confinement journey. We read that she was filled with the Holy Spirit, the child leaping in her womb, as she greeted Mary as mother of her Lord.

What we discover in reading the first chapter of Luke, is that Mary's simple and faithful "Yes" to the angel Gabriel, by the time it had gestated throughout her long and arduous journey in the Judean hill country, had grown into a wonderful Spirit-filled song of praise followed by an impressive divine manifesto which she proclaimed to Elizabeth. We of course know this as the Magnificat:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, ...surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ... he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; .. filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

These incisive words placed on the lips of young Mary as she encounters Elizabeth, have been borne out of her journey with God, initiated by her 'Yes'....

"Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." I wonder what the world would be like if more people responded to God's interruption in their lives as Mary did. Mary models the kind of reaction we can all have to divinity's disturbance in our lives. She wonders and ponders. She questions and considers. She answers in awe.