

Advent 4. Luke 1:39-55. December 23, 2018.

We had decided many times to give up hope. Our theory was that if we could bar the door against hope, we could turn away also hope's shadow, disappointment. We had already hoped without fulfillment long enough. For years we had tried to get pregnant, but the cycle of hope-disappointment, hope-disappointment was among those we could not break. After we changed strategies and began the adoption process, the infection of hope continued. In the parlance of the adoption industry, we repeatedly tried to "guard our hearts." And repeatedly, each new lead captured us completely. As much as we tried, shutting the door against hope was like trying to stop a river's flood with our bare hands. Despite all our efforts and intentions, the hope kept slipping through our defenses and soaking us, until we found ourselves swimming in hope and then inevitably almost drowning in disappointment.

After our most recent disappointment, it wasn't so much that we had decided to give up hope. It was more like we had just plain run out of it, the way a bank account or gas tank ends up emptied without anyone deciding for it to be. When a new lead came, we rolled our eyes. When the initial interview with the birthmother went well, we groaned, "so what?" But only a week later, we can feel our toes getting wet. The slow, uneven flood has begun. We might decide again to dam the channels to our hearts, but all we have is fingers, and we cannot clamp them tight enough to stop these unwelcome guests, hope and disappointment.

There are times when hope isn't particularly welcome. Times when we'd prefer to be a little less than fully alive, because being alive (having hope), must include being vulnerable. For the two of us, it's another baby. Many of you, I know, have been or are in the hushed society of the infertile with us. But for others it's something else: a job after months or years of searching, a phone call from an estranged beloved, a cure for a long disease, a navigable ramp out of poverty, deliverance from addiction. And for us all together, it's longing for the world of Mary's song, where God's mercy is the rule, the lowly are lifted up, the hungry are fed. Longing for a world where we are not oppressed or where we don't find it quite so hard to disentangle ourselves from oppressing others. Longing for a world where we and those we love and those unlike us are not quite so exposed to the attacks or carelessness of the wicked. The whole creation groans for the salvation of God. And at times, that salvation seems as far off as it has ever been. It is no surprise if we find it easier to cling to the comfortable callousness of cynicism than it is to risk the vulnerability of hope again.

But today's gospel story is, to me, about hope and I find it impossible to resist. This is a meeting between two mothers of impossible children. Elizabeth is barren and, in the quaint translation of the New Revised Standard Version, "getting on in years." Mary, as I hope we know, is a virgin. And yet here they are, the children in their wombs leaping

towards each other. The first genre for pregnancy stories is probably the annals of hope, but this story has a broader scope than women feeling the future grow inside them.

This is a story about babies, but it is also about the hope of God's world. This is the astonishing way that God's hope comes into the world: not through thunder or fire or flood but through the fragile difficult beauty of a child in an laborer's family. It is not the most obvious start for the redemption of the world. All parents have hopes for their children but look at the hope of these two women: Elizabeth calls Mary the mother of her Lord, and Mary's hope is not for a good college but for the upending of the world—the lowly uplifted and the powerful cast down, the rich sent away empty and the hungry filled with good things. This small unlikely tenuous slow-moving hope that is Jesus is the hope that the world will finally become God's world—the world it is meant to be.

We, too, have this hope. This hope and its seemingly perpetual deferral is why we gather here, huddled in the midst of the world's darkness together facing the light. At times we can't bear to trust this hope, as the structure of our public life continues to deteriorate through a series of apparent cataclysms and our private disasters continue on apace. But we are finally fools to oppose hope, to clamp our fingers and bar our doors. Because the Christian hope is the truth of the world.

Fragile, tenuous, humble, almost happenstance, it is the fabric of the universe. To open ourselves to it is to make ourselves vulnerable, but it is also to let ourselves be made alive. I am not saying that we will get everything we hope for. Our private hopes are not identical to the Christian hope. I am saying that the Christian life is a life of hope. That our belief that a child born in Bethlehem is the salvation of the world is an act of radical, revolutionary hope. And that this hope that we so badly need is also the hope the world needs, though it has wrapped itself in cynicism. Our sure and certain hope is that God has come among us to remake us, and God is coming to remake the world. Amen.