

Unlikely Suspects

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."

Waiting is not a skill many of us possess these days. We live in a world of immediacy; many of us are tethered electronically to the latest news, the most recent emails, and we no longer even take time to call one another. We simply text a few short sentences with abbreviated words and we leave spell check to sort out whatever spelling we botched in our haste as we rapidly hit "send."

Given all of that, I think the last Sunday in Advent, which we observe this coming Sunday, has a difficult job to do. Liturgically, Christmas has not happened yet, but in the world in which we live, Christmas began just before Thanksgiving as a secular holiday and retail season, and most folks are just ready to have it over with.

But if we dare to try to keep the snail's pace of a calendar in which Christmas is not yet, we arrive at this day with a sense of heightened expectation. We stand on the threshold between the anticipation of God's promised fulfillment and its ultimate realization in the birth of Jesus, the Christ child.

We should be very careful not to sentimentalize Mary's encounter with her destiny in the form of this messenger from God. Mary has just agreed to become a disgraced woman. Mary's untimely pregnancy puts her at great risk. We know that in the end Joseph, Mary's fiancé, is also moved to enter this mystery with Mary but, that too was an unlikely outcome.

Mary's spirit rejoices (in what we call the Magnificat) that God has looked with favor on his lowly servant. She is not speaking of her own humility and gentleness and meekness---this interpretation is how her story has been stripped of its substance. "Lowly" actually carries a social connotation and it means marginalized or disgraced.

As we hear the words of the Magnificat this Sunday, we are in awe of the gloriously joyful song that bursts forth in the middle of a dark and dangerous situation for this young woman. We hear the deep truth that God's mercy is never divorced from God's justice. We hear that God is faithful to God's promises and that the world will soon know this truth in a very unexpected way.

And if we think this hope and its attendant struggle is something we simply remember from the past or that maybe this is too great a message or reality to be borne by a teenage girl, we only have to look to the news to know differently. Only legend has Mary as a teenager and she could have been older than we think, but in sticking with the popular belief, let's wonder together if a young girl from the middle of nowhere could possibly impact the world.

By now we all know the story of Malala Yousafzai, who was 11 years old when she inadvertently became the voice for millions of Muslim girls in Pakistan and Afghanistan who want to attend school.

Then, at age 14, we know that her voice, her song of hope for God's justice and mercy for the lowly of her world, became a deadly threat to the brutal forces of our own day. That a teenage girl in a male-dominated, religiously fundamentalist culture could pose such a threat is astounding.

But yet, here we are today---Malala is now a woman, we know her name, we know her story, and she has been awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace before she was 17. If we are paying attention, we want to fight for her cause even though our girls already have the freedom she is willing to die for. And though violent, dominating power tried to silence her, she still lives and her hope has been taken up by the whole world.

God's power to surprise us in unusual ways and thus change the world happened way back then---and Malala shows us that God is still doing these things in the here and now.

With violence, war, xenophobia, and racism rampant in our headlines, we wait in hope for the day that all of God's children from every faith and nation finally join in making God's promise of justice and hope a reality for all.

Hope may seem a meager tool in the face of such global pain, but hope allows us to see the moment and then seize the opportunity of God's in-breaking justice, and join our voices and actions with those who are already fearless in their desire to see God's justice come on earth right here and right now. And we wait...we wait and work for that day when, like Mary and Malala, unlikely suspects as world changers, no longer have to claim their hauntingly hopeful courage alone, but are joined by a world whose thirst for blessing, whose desire for justice and mercy is as strong and powerfully hopeful as their own.

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+