

## **A Conspiracy of Hope**

Luke 1:39-55

Fourth Sunday of Advent/ Year C

December 20, 2009

**O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. AMEN.**

Well, its almost here. Just five more days and Christmas will come. Just five days until the shepherds and angels make their appearance. Just five days until the donkey ride to Bethlehem, until that inn materializes on the horizon with its no vacancy sign. If we watch very carefully, perhaps we will even see the first brilliant glimpses of the star which will guide us to the town that the Prophet Micah calls “one of the little clans of Judah.” In other words a town of insignificance. One of the great tragedies of the Christmas story is that having heard it so many times, we fail to appreciate the shocking, incomprehensible mystery, not to mention love, of a God who becomes flesh. For the last several weeks, we have heard the ancient prophecies read, we have listened to the song of Zechariah, we have been confronted with the voice of the “one crying in the wilderness” trying to get our attention. For all of John the Baptist’s screaming about axes and pitchforks and unquenchable fires; for all his railing against snakes in the grass. He has been trying to tell us the good news. The good news that God is coming (in the flesh). The good news that God will become one of us and in so doing become one with us. During this holy season of Advent, the Church’s lectionary has been chocked full of messages and messengers, with voices brimming with apprehension and hope. The voice which speaks to us, this morning, is a different voice, though no less a challenging one. It is the voice of the one whom countless generations have called “blessed”.

The snapshots which the gospels give us of the Virgin Mary are few and far between. Saint Mark, who never mentions Jesus’ birth, refers to the Lord’s mother only in the third chapter of his gospel and then not in a very good light. On the other hand, Saint John seems to portray her as a bit pushy. After all, she does incite her Son to change water into wine at a wedding feast. As for Saint Matthew, Mary is portrayed as mute. Not a word passes her lips. She is as silent as the night found in a certain beloved christmas carol. Not so in Luke’s gospel. Luke’s Mary doesn’t seem to know the meaning of quiet. She is not a woman who keeps her place. She has something to say to us. Something, ultimately, to sing to us.

Mary is like many girls her age- fourteen and betrothed to a man whom she barely knows. That in itself is frightening enough. Sitting up at night, she ponders the possibilities of the marriage. Will it be a good one? Can she look forward to plenty of children? What about the physical part of marriage? She is forced to think about the hard realities of life and relationship at a time when most of our teenagers are simply concerned about the next party. Leaving home and living with Joseph frightens her but nearly as much as other events that have recently taken place. Mary had expected gifts and congratulations upon her betrothal. She had not expected an angel. See what happens when you sit up nights and pray. And boy, did that angel have news. And it was definitely not news for a young girl. In fact, the news was of such tremendous

importance that it would have set even a grown woman to trembling. According to the Angel Gabriel, she is to bear the Son of the Most High, the very Son of God in her inexperienced womb. Can she actually do it, she wonders.

All manner of questions swirl through Mary's mind. Why would God choose a teenager? How will she explain her pregnancy to Joseph, to her family, to the town and the authorities. They will more than likely accuse her of adultery and have her stoned. Sure, she can tell them that her child is the Son of God, that the Holy Spirit impregnated her. But who is going to believe that? She isn't even sure if she is ready to believe it. But then, not believing it, not believing that God would send his son into the world is even worse. With this child in her womb, the future is indeed scary but without this child something tells her the future is hopeless. Before she knows it, Mary finds herself saying yes. "I am the handmaid of the Lord". With those words, born not of the mind but of the heart, the adventure begins.

Mary's agreement to be, as Saint Ephrem the Syrian says, the "one who gave the body to the One who covers all" did not alleviate her fear or her excitement. Not only do her feelings follow her but they actually propel her into the hill country. She travels along those barren dusty roads with only the blooming olive trees and the occasional bird for company. She braves bandits and Roman soldiers- soldiers who wouldn't think twice of taking advantage of a young girl. She journeys to the home of her cousin Elizabeth. Elizabeth will understand. Elizabeth is older and wiser, much older and wiser, elderly in fact. And certainly, if there is anyone who will understand a strange pregnancy, it will be Elizabeth. Elizabeth is at an age when she should be bouncing grandchildren on her knee. But instead, a child is flowering in her womb.

Mary is a ball of excitement and apprehension as she steps across the threshold of the house of Zechariah and shouts out a greeting. Mary doesn't know it, but her encounter with the angel went much better than old Zechariah's. She can, at least, speak; all he could do is wave and gesture until his son was born. Mary's cousin steps from around the corner. Their eyes meet. Mary's are frightened yet joyful. Elizabeth's are deep and comprehending. Mary looks at her cousin's face, lined with wrinkles yet full of life, then she glances at her belly. And before either one of them knows it, their hands are clasped together. The virgin and the grandmother. In Elizabeth's womb there is movement. A great and powerful kick, like that of a gazelle leaping joyfully across verdant fields. A dance of one who celebrates because Life itself has walked through the door. The joy of the one in her womb is so infectious, that Elizabeth is compelled to burst forth. Staring at Mary, she shouts "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Where did that come from? Such an outburst couldn't help but startle Mary. How in the world does Elizabeth know? Mary certainly hasn't told her cousin that she is pregnant. All Mary said was "Hello". Then again she should have known better. After all, the angel simply said hello when she was sitting by her bed in Nazareth and look what happened. Mary, who is ready to explain her condition, who has probably gone over the story a thousand times in her head along the lonely road- Nazareth, the angel with flapping golden wings, the Son of God,- discovers she has nothing to explain at all. The news of the angel, however fearful it may be for her, is

good news. Elizabeth confirms it. There are no questions, there are no explanations, just two women holding each other tight with the sure and certain knowledge that everything is going to be O.K.

The Christian writer, Megan McKenna, in her book *Mary: Shadow of Grace* notes that Elizabeth and Mary are conspirators. For most of us the word conspirator conjures up images of backroom deals, nefarious deeds and hidden darkness. We have trouble seeing a conspirator or a conspiracy in a positive light. However, if we took time to pick apart the word, we would discover that the word “conspire” simply means “breathing together”. Conspirators are those who breathe together. In their embrace, Mary and Elizabeth breathe together. Their conspiracy is not one born in hidden darkness, but born in hidden light, in the blazing fires of their wombs. Their conspiracy is not born of deal making but of promise; a promise which is coming true. Their conspiracy, their “breathing together,” is not nefarious but joyfully and awesomely expectant. Their breath enlivened by the very breath of God, the Holy Spirit. Moments pass and they break their embrace. But the conspiracy is not over, instead the conspiracy has just begun.

Mary draws into her lungs the crisp air around her and belts out a song. A song whose tone is so magnificent that we can hear within its chords the bells of paradise and within its cadences we can detect the beating of angels wings. Her song is that of a caged bird who is, at last, able to fly with her wings outstretched toward the breaking dawn. “My soul magnifies the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my savior. He has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on, all generations will call me blessed.” A self-fulfilling prophecy to say the least. Mary, however, is not done prophesying or conspiring. “Breathing together,” particularly in a culture, where we pride ourselves on individualism, is revolutionary. And Mary, the favored one of God is revolutionary. She sings of a world turned up-side down. Of a world where the proud are put out to pasture, where the powerful and the presidential are sent tumbling from their high horses and where victims are lifted from the mud. Her voice sings of a God who will sit the starving poor down at a banquet and will leave the callous rich out in the cold to digest their deeds. Mary, herself, becomes a sign of this revolution, of this reversal, of these “things that cannot be and yet are.” God is entering the world. He is becoming flesh; as flesh and blood as our own skin. He chooses not some powerful woman, but a poor frightened teenager to bear him into the world. And in so doing, we discover that it is not the mighty who are chosen, but the lowly. In the coming kingdom, the pauper become a prince. Even the peasant girl becomes queen. The palace revolution, the conspiracy against the rulers of this world has begun. And the conspiracy still isn’t finished. Mary and Elizabeth continue to breathe together. And you know if we listen carefully, with our hearts open to the Holy Spirit, I think we may hear something too. Do you hear it? Listen! We may just be breathing right along with them. I wonder if they can hear us conspiring for a new creation. More than that, I wonder if we can hear ourselves. Or if the world can hear us. Perhaps that’s what Mary is asking us. Are we conspiring with her, with her son, with the prophets and patriarchs, the saints of ages past, with our mothers and fathers? Are we being as bold as we need to be? Are we, as this Christmas approaches, witnessing to a new life, to a new way of being. Will we choose to conspire or to expire. The choice in the end is as close as the next breath

away.