

Faith Mennonite Church
Advent 4: Flood of Mercy
December 23, 2012
Joetta Schlabach

Holy surprises: Pregnant women prophesying
Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-56

What was God thinking? What *was* God thinking?

I mean, we are talking about *the* central event in salvation history, the coming of God into the world to heal the breach between people and their divine creator that has caused so much human suffering. Today companies dedicate whole divisions, communication plans and countless dollars to roll out a new concept or product line. Anticipation builds. Everybody knows something's coming!

But God? Obviously God's ways are not our ways. Obviously God *didn't* consult with highly paid communication consultants! No, nothing flashy here. Just a couple pregnant women—one in her teens who isn't married and the other old enough to be a grandmother. Their meeting isn't arranged by handlers in a high-visibility setting. Rather, young, anxious Mary leaves her small town and flees to her older, country-cousin Elizabeth to figure out what is going on.

When Mary received the angel's message that she would bear a special child, the messenger told her that her cousin Elizabeth, way beyond child-bearing age, was also "with child." Something was going on. Mary needed time, space, and connection to begin figuring out what this something was.

Although the message Mary had received was fairly straight forward, it didn't necessarily make any more sense to her than events that swirl around us today make sense to us. Even if it was a message from God she needed confirmation that she wasn't simply dreaming. She needed help in understanding what lay ahead. And so she sought out the person that seemed most likely to understand... someone else who was pregnant in an unlikely and untimely way. And, thankfully, someone who lived in the back country, out of the lens of the paparazzi.

When Mary arrived, she received her first confirmation in the form of a kick! The child that Elizabeth carried leaped in her womb, causing Elizabeth to break out in a prophetic utterance, naming Mary "blessed" and "the mother of my Lord." This wasn't so different from the angel's message, but coming from an obviously pregnant woman whom she knew, would have had a grounded, earthy sense of reality.

Elizabeth was far enough along in her pregnancy that neighbors would have noticed. And certainly they noticed the silence of her husband Zachariah, the now side-lined priest. She no doubt had already become used to the rumor, the whispers, and the constant joking of even her best friends. All this made her more than ready to open her doors and offer sanctuary to her young cousin who was just beginning a similar journey. She was more than ready for a visitor who would come to offer and receive a loving embrace, without question or reservation.

God chose two obscure women to nurture and give birth to this process of salvation. Two women who were willing to enter the abyss of unknowing...to bear children who would never truly be their own. Women, whose equally strong yet quiet husbands stood by them faithfully. Women open to imagination and the possibility that God was at work, in the kick of an unborn

child, and in the prophecies of their ancestors. Women who said yes before it all made sense, and then began making room for the lives they would birth by making room for one another.

That is the timeless work of Advent—making room for one another and for God. That is the timeless gift of salvation that we celebrate at Christmas—God making room for us by entering into our room, our space, our time, our existence. Never flashy, never against our will. But precisely what and when we need.

Mary and Elizabeth, the pregnant ones, embodied this making room. Elizabeth the elder offered sanctuary to young Mary. She encouraged. She helped her see a bigger picture. She let her know she wasn't crazy. Each of us needs the wisdom of welcoming elders. People who help us to follow uncharted paths. People who encourage simply by sharing their stories and listening to ours over a cup of tea.

And Mary the younger brought hope to elder Elizabeth. How satisfying that this young woman, chosen by God, would come to her, would need her. How exciting to see faith springing up in a new generation and to see God intimately at work in another ordinary person. How significant the invitation to make space for this new vision which might stir up the social order, raise difficult questions and controversy, even misunderstanding. Each of us needs the vision of seeking youth and children. People who help us consider uncharted paths and ideas. People who challenge the expected and the accepted and remind us that God's Spirit is always on the move beyond our imagination.

It was in this simple domestic setting that two pregnant women first recognized and then proclaimed the work of God in the intimacy of their lives *and* breaking out into the very structures of society, shaking the foundations of conventional practice, of unjust systems, of hopelessness. Joined in solidarity these two women would give birth to sons who would live into the prophecies of their mothers. John, the forerunner would call people to turn toward God. Jesus, the Savior, would call people to live in the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.