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Claiming The Absurd

I remember the day I found out I was pregnant with our daughter Libbie. At breakfast with a few girlfriends, between bites of the goodness that is egg and cheese on a bagel, washed down by an absurdly large container of iced coffee, I felt a twinge, not yet morning sickness, but close. On a whim I thought, I'd just check to see if maybe it was closer to morning sickness than a random twinge. When the pregnancy test revealed those two faint, but distinct, pink lines I felt my heart immediately drop into my stomach. I was elated. And, I screamed, outloud, into my empty house "I'm Pregnant". Naturally, being the kind of person who can't keep anything to myself. I immediately jumped in the car, and drove to my husband Drew's office. Proudly, with my little plastic white stick in a ziplock baggie on the seat next to me. When I arrived I called Drew to come meet me outside. And as he came down the stairs of his office building, I burst out of the car, waved the little stick in the air, flung my arms around him, and proclaimed "we're pregnant, we're pregnant, we're pregnant."

I imagine Mary and Elizabeth's encounter to hold some of these same characteristics, joy, enthusiasm, foolishness, and absurdity (I don't know about either of these two ladies, but I do know someone who was entirely embarrassed by their wife's completely absurd birth proclamation in the midst of his office parking lot). But, while my birth announcement came in the form of the two faint but distinct lines made possible by the First Response Early Pregnancy Test. Mary's came in the form of an angel named Gabriel made possible by the Creator of our Universe. And, while I was married, gainfully employed, having just purchased our first home, and of the "appropriate" age to have a baby (or at least the age when people begin to pester, "are you two thinking about a family yet?"). Mary was an unwed teenage girl, living under the rule and domination of Roman authorities, considered a second class citizen as a person of Jewish faith and heritage, and also as a woman. So, while my announcement came from careful planning and preparation and was received as a joyous blessing. Mary's came seemingly out of the blue, or more like out of the heavens, as a possible death sentence (as it was permissible at that time for men who found their betrothed with child to subject them to death by stoning) or at the very least a condemnation to a life of poverty and solitude (that inevitably would befall a woman who found herself in that kind of "condition). And so, it is here that we find Mary, running to her cousin Elizabeth, who is also with child. Not as a young unwed teen, but as a middle aged woman, at the end of her maternal timeline. Having lived through so many years, and so much (we can contextually assume) shame and heartache from a barren womb. In the midst of overwhelming joy for the gift of unexpected life, and oppressive angst for the unpredictability of an often cruel and unfair world, these two women come together to share in the absolute absurdity of this life in which the only appropriate and completely necessary response is one of shared vulnerability and uplifting love.

For my first pregnancy, when it was time to go in for the ultrasound to see that tiny flicker of a heartbeat on the black and white screen, Drew was insistent that he be by my side, (and I quote) "just to make sure there was only one baby in there." For my second pregnancy though, it was a different story. This time my twinge felt more like a pain, coming on stronger and earlier, almost frighteningly so. So, instead of waiting for the typical 8 week appointment my Dr. brought me in at 6 weeks with a day's notice of the appointment time (disallowing Drew the opportunity, this go around, to take off work and join me). As I sat alone in the office looking at the screen waiting to see my tiny flicker, it looked different. Instead of one flicker, there were two dots. As I heard the doctor say quite matter of factly, "and here are your two sacs Mrs. Byrd." Completely shocked, uncertain, and bewildered as to how this was even possible. The Dr. relayed that, with my "maternal age" it was possible for one of those tiny dots to simply vanish. And so we would have to wait another two weeks to find out if it would be two viable heartbeats, or just one. Leaving me to float in that liminal space of now and not yet. For now I was pregnant again, not yet to know what the future would hold for the lives in my womb.

I think the absurdity of it all might just be that however hard we try to control, predict, or even lay out our future, we have very little power over what lies around the corner. This is not to say that we should not work to plan, or take agency in the unfolding of our own lives. It would be quite foolish, or at the very least completely depressing, to live in a way that says to heck with it all. But, at the same time, it would be even more absurd to live in a way that allows us to believe we can somehow predict, command, or ensure our own future, or worse the future of others. Because this would be to deny ourselves the sustaining hope that comes from faith in a grace filled God. The blissful peace that comes from letting go of all our striving and efforts to control. And, the exhilarating joy that comes when we are able to share in the complete absurdity of this life with others. Just as we find here in the exchange between Mary and Elizabeth, as they embrace each other and the porcercity of their situations.

As I waited those two weeks to find out if I would need to make room in my life to grieve the loss of what could have been, or prepare for the room that would need to be made, I did the only thing I could, I held tight to those closest to me. Leaning on their steadfast presence and their constant love to uphold me as I found myself overwhelmed by the utter happenstance of life. Weeks later, as we announced the news of our family of than three, was now growing to become a family of five with the birth of our twin boys, a facebook friend commented “well I guess God does have a sense of humor after all.” Agreeing full heartedly, I thought that God does! Our scene from Luke’s Gospel today as we find ourselves in the first chapter of the life and entry of our Saviour into the world, is one of my favorites. Because it reveals to us how God comes in the most unlikely of spaces, in the most foolish of times, in the seemingly strange, even unholy, at least unconventional or better yet unorthodox. This is where we see God literally breaking in, into our story of these two women’s union, into our story of salvation for this world, into our story of the daily absurdity of this life.

As we come to our fourth and final week of Advent, with Christmas approaching at full speed ahead pace, I would encourage us to lean into the invitation that Mary and Elizabeth show us today. That invitation to claim life in all of its absurdity. A proclamation that allows us to experience the true power of hope in a God who continually breaks in to reveal the Divine that lies at the center of who we are. A proclamation that allows us to experience the immense bliss of peace that comes (if for a moment) when we can simply let go, and accept the precarity of life. Allowing it to remind us that we (like Mary and Elizabeth) depend on one another, and we can’t do this alone. A proclamation that allows us to embody the joy that comes from sharing this same absurdity with others. Inviting us to take ourselves less seriously, and enjoy the moment. And, a proclamation that allows us to more fully love and be loved, by the Divine that is so completely present in each and every moment of this strange life. Readily available in our ability to let it all go, to take it all in, and share it with those around us.