

Luke 1:39-55

*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."*

*And Mary said,*

*"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.*

*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.*

*His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.*

*He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;*

*he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.*

*He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."*

This December, I did something I have never done before. I went on a four-day solo retreat the second week of Advent. It sounded crazy at the time, too much going on, too much to balance leading up to Christmas, how could I dare step away from it all. I almost didn't, almost talked myself out of it, too much to do, too long to be away. But Spirit kept nudging me to follow through so, I did.

On December 6<sup>th</sup> I set out, after the council meeting to approve the preliminary budget. I had packed short sleeves and long johns because you never know what to expect in Lake Tahoe this time of year. I kissed the dog, unplugged the Christmas tree, checked that Ellis Jane had

transportation to and from school each day, and hit the road with Katie's blessing to Zephyr Point Conference Center on South Shore.

I stopped in Placerville for lunch and could feel my heart racing in anticipation of driving up through the burned areas of Desolation Wilderness. Fortunately, and at any other time I would not have considered this a blessing, but Cal Trans was doing so much repair along the highway that they had locked HWY 50 down to one lane at critical junctures. One lane going up and the same lane coming down meant we had to take turns. Taking turns takes time, so gratefully and slowly my fellow travelers and I crawled up the mountain and as the scars began to reveal themselves, I took it all in.

At first it didn't look so horrible, burned trees mixed in with green ones, you know the way fire can zig this way and that. Reassuringly, the American River was running strong thanks to previous rains and to my great relief, cabin after cabin lay unmarked by the fire's destruction and instead had banners waving eternal thanks to the firefighters.

The higher I climbed, however, the more visceral the loss, Noble and Douglass Firs reduced, first to crispy brown pine needles, then higher up just tall black sticks where once were healthy stands of trees, until finally there was nothing at all- where our family cabin used to be, nothing at all.

I was not allowed to stop, traffic kept pace and flag bearers in bright orange vests waived us on. Perhaps it was for the best this first time around, just driving past might have been all I could really handle. Such deep sadness filled my chest, a dull pain behind my ribcage and just above my heart. The Capacitar leaders call this the universal sore spot, and it was indeed sore.

As hard as it was, I think it was important to feel the loss. The wise ones taught that in our mourning, grieving we are changed for the better. For it is only in feeling the loss that we can also know deep gratitude for all that is and all that ever was. Feeling loss enables us to re-doubles our commitment to action and the resiliency upon which all life depends.

As I crested the hill, scorched earth turned to the welcomed sight of towering green pines, vibrant and standing proud. At last a great exhale, shoulders dropped, heartbeat slowed. It was still there, the rockface, the snowcapped mountains off in the distance surrounding the magnificent jewel that is the most beautiful lake in all the world. It was all still there.

I heard a voice inside whisper, "you see there is still more life, there is always more life, there will always be more life than death."

Today's text about Mary running to her cousin Elizabeth is another version of the promise that there will always be more life than death. It may not look that way at first but that is God's covenant with the earth and all its inhabitants- there will always be more life.

I was given a book awhile back that I'd kept wanting to read, so I brought it with me on retreat. The book is called "Thinking Like a Mountain; Toward a Council of All Beings." It is a collective of voices ranging from spiritual warrior Joanna Macy to environmental justice warrior Arne Naess. The book paints a bleak picture of the reality in which we live, one where as a species we have nearly brought about our own peril, and we have certainly brought about the destruction of a diversity of species; animal, vegetable, and mineral.

It was a hard read, not a feel-good book, and then there was this- the possibility that each of us has come into being at precisely the moment where our voices, our awareness's can work together to preserve the life of our planet and all that exist upon it- if only human beings could stop acting like the world is ours to use and discard. And we think of Mary, who would bear an unlikely leader for God's people, she was just the life that was needed to break for more life. What if each one of us is also that life that is needed to break forth more life?

In the background, playing softly as I read inside my cozy accommodations beside the lake, was an instrumental Christmas station. And I heard, perhaps for the first time, the words beneath the words of our beloved Christmas carols. What I heard was a truth that has been there all along, I just hadn't stopped to notice. The music we sing during this season is about the birth of Jesus yes, but it really centers around casting off destructive patterns of living- slavery, war, and destruction in order that we might generate more life. The carols are about the simple needs of mother and child yes, but even more they are about the greatest need of creation which is to live and keep on living.

Joy to the world the lord is come- death has been replaced by birth, cynicism replaced by wonder, and hatred overtaken by love just as God envisions. A future built on love. That is why we light the candle of love today, to keep the flame of possibility burning.

Christ's birth into this world, into our lives is something perhaps we've come to take for granted, a nice story we indulge in each year. But when we listen, really listen to the promise that the Christ Child brings we can't help but hear a profound invitation to preserve the sanctity of life. Jesus, a child who survived against all odds, lived to proclaimed that there is more life yet to be lived, more love yet to be revealed, more light to shine forth in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it.

On the third day of my retreat it snowed, soft pillowy, gorgeous snow that blanked the earth covering up all the cracks in the sidewalks and well-worn pathways, it disappeared the evidence of the Caldor and Dixie fires that tore through more than 347 thousand acres. And for just a moment I experienced bliss, quiet and gentle, my world stood still with sheer possibility. By the next morning the snow had frozen, and everything was back to business as usual. If we let dare to let it be, this story of Mary joy in giving birth to the Christ child be like the first snow; a moment of promise, a glimpse of what might be- quiet and sacred.

When all is said and done; the boxes are put away and the tree is in the recycle, life too will be back to business as, well as usual as it can be in this strange post, not post pandemic time. I ask you to remember one thing, no matter how old or young you are, remember that this season was never about presents but about presence. Emanuel's presence with us, the promise of life against all odds. More life, always more life.

This season of Advent through Epiphany is about choosing carefully how we live and how the way we live impact others and the planet. For Christians this season presents an opportunity to re-covenant with God for the good of creation. Don't let that opportunity be lost on us this year, Christ's birth (the birth of every child) is a testimony to our desire that life go on and keep going on.

At the end of the day, at the end of a lifetime each of us has but one question for which to answer, did we do the very best we could to protect the life of this planet and promote love? If the answer is yes, we did our very best as often and as much as we could to ensure that the world would go on living and loving- if that is our answer then Christ's coming will not have been in vain.

Recognizing that not all of you will join us on Christmas Eve, I take this opportunity to wish each of you the merriest of Christmases and a new year filled with hope and goodwill toward all.

Amen