

I ask God's grace as we ponder an old story made new in the season of expectation, journey, and wonder. Amen.

This Advent season finds us opening a new year of our life together before all other things close, much like last Sunday's apocalyptic Gospel reading starts us in an end of a book rather than perfectly aligned at the fresh beginning of a Chapter 1 for Advent 2. And why shouldn't it be that what grace we take from our sacred space here sanctifies the work of doing our waiting "out there" in the overlap? We are conditioned to accept, by way of the relationships that form us into adults, the great mystery that life was here before us and will come after us, even when we don't quite understand it.

We are always starting in the middle.

When we meet a new friend, a potential lover, a beloved mentor, we deepen our bonds by asking to hear every story they're willing to tell about what it was like to *be* them before they were with *us*. Stitch by stitch, we embroider our lives with theirs and their hard-won wisdom. We bind our lives together and do our best to note the diversity within our unity: who are the gluten-free at our table? whose father is a sore subject of conversation best left for prayerful silences? who celebrates a recovery? who mourns a lifelong love lost?

In relationship, we grow as we hear ourselves speak, hearing our past tumble out of us newly reformed, learning lessons that might have remained hidden before. We apologize for things that often need no apology, we battle our own ghosts instead of engaging the flesh and blood of our present partner. We sometimes speak without thinking, and can be thoughtlessly hurtful.

Giving oneself finally, fully over to being *in relationship* with any human being is embracing a mess—and being embraced as a mess in turn.

In my own life, as a not-yet-stepmother, I have new lessons to learn. As I confide in friends about the messiness of reimagining and remaking family in the middle of everything, I am trying to understand how parenthood works for those of us who were gifted with a frightening amount of Love for "other people's" children and all the complications of emotion entailed. Sometimes, I wince at the well-meant but hurtful reply, "*Yeah, but you knew what you were signing up for when you started.*"

Did some woman in her circle of friends say this very thing to Mary, the Mother of God? As her body told a story her society didn't have a room for, how did *she* meet that expectation—while she held together both her first-hand knowledge of human life in its dust and dirt and her awe at a transcendent and as-yet-unembodied Creator?

How did Mary, our consummate Mother, make her preparations through all those earlier, quieter months of anticipation and challenge? How did she walk faithfully into this final stretch of longing for an event that begins a new Life—which always interrupts the middles of established ones? How many of her own experiences felt reassuring, even into Egypt and Galilee, because they were made recognizable by participating in motherhood like so many generations before? And as her own understanding of His power and place changed with each new day, how did she awaken to her own strength to claim a role forged brand new by this specific child, this specific life, this specific Love?

As she waited for the mystery of the Christ child to arrive, did she also know to await the arrival of an accompanying grief, saying to herself: “I can do almost nothing to spare this child whom I love more than breath itself from the unvarnished truth of pain and suffering in *this* imperfect human life?”

Did she know that being left standing on the outside of His life while He privileged his spiritual family over their blood connection could sting as badly as hearing “you’re not my mother” flung with the acid of preteen angst?

But you knew what you were signing up for when you started... No, but you might get a taste of it. We might have heard this story before.

And then we start this journey together anyway, because that is what Love does.

See, the messiness of being *in relationship* to the human family is knowing that the inevitable end will also come one day.

While on a family trip to Venice this September, our feisty tour guide walked us past the local hospital and described the beautiful view of the graveyards from the maternity ward. She smiled as rambunctious kids played soccer in the shadows of the crosses and spires of Basilica dei Santi Giovanni e Paolo next door and speedboat ambulances idled in the water, waiting.

What better to remind us, she said, that we make a small part of the whole cycle? Every day is a gift.

My soul sings in gratitude.
I’m dancing in the mystery of God.
The light of the Holy One is within me
and I am blessed, so truly blessed.

This goes deeper than human thinking.
I am filled with awe
at Love whose only condition
is to be received.

The gift is not for the proud,
for they have no room for it.
The strong and self-sufficient ones
don’t have this awareness.

*But those who know their emptiness
can rejoice in Love’s fullness.*
It’s the Love that we are made for,
the reason for our being.
It fills our inmost heart space
and brings to birth in us, the Holy One.

--John Shelby Spong, *A New Christianity for a New World*

Even though I have re-read the Magnificat pretty often through the Daily Office, I am just beginning to see the fierceness of unconditional and pro-creative Love as Mary takes a place beyond roleplay in the story of salvation. She sets the example, living out the poetry of hope she sings regarding the new Life coming who will remove the sting from Death itself. The Blessed One who comes to us in the name of the Lord, long awaited and mighty. Once unknowable. And now uncompromisingly incarnate.

For it is her new life she dreams of—and ours, if we choose to embrace it again this season. Could we not also take *this* moment to give thanks that Christ will come again to widen our circle? To listen again to the promise that we will see the glory of the Lord in our lifetime, and to celebrate how we already have? To know beyond doubt that the apocalyptic thunder in the clouds is the sound of our very own heart giving way again to a new and heavenly peace? There will come a time, in the stillness after the storm, when we will be able to hear what God is saying to us now.

Quiet friend who has come so far,
feel how your breathing makes more space around you.
Let this darkness be a bell tower
and you the bell. As you ring,

what batters you becomes your strength.
Move back and forth into the change.
What is it like, such intensity of pain?
If the drink is bitter, turn yourself to wine.

In this uncontainable night,
be the mystery at the crossroads of your senses,
the meaning discovered there.

And if the world has ceased to hear you,
say to the silent earth: I flow.
To the rushing water, speak: I am.

--Rilke