

Mary's Answer for Tough Times 4 Advent B

I read an article in the NY Times about churches changing their emphasis from the traditional themes of Advent and Christmas to that of addressing the fear and greed of fellow citizens. The fear and losses people have experienced they say, is driving people to church. Churches saw this happen after 911. Whenever there is a crisis, it sets people to thinking about priorities, praying more, looking for God's help and figuring out what they should be doing with their lives.

Truthfully, I think, maybe it is better to talk about thanking God for faith and the blessings that we have. Maybe it would better to talk about the baby Jesus not having a decent place to stay, so we could feel better about our situation. However, preaching about how unemployment and loss of savings can lead to a closer walk with God, may not be comforting unless it can give meaning in the middle of such a crisis. If the economy shrinks does the soul become larger? Are people ready to hear the gospel because of a broken economy?

Three churches cited in the Times article are experiencing a jump in growth. People are hurting. Husbands and wives are getting fired in the same week. In the article, "Bad Times Draw Bigger Crowds to Churches," one pastor is quoted, "When people are shaken to the core, it can open doors." Like the knock-knock jokes children play, people are searching for someone at the door that can give answers and provide help. And as some searching for work are finding, the answers they hope for are slow in coming.

Was it any different in Jesus' day when hope for change was in the air? The nation was under the rule of the empire. Freedom of religion was tentative. Zealots with new ideas for change abounded and when their movements abruptly ended, hope once again became just a dream.

Mary was newly engaged and she dreamt of her future with Joseph her betrothed. Then the stranger came and her world was shaken to the core by his message. It's the sort of message no one wants to hear. You're pregnant! And though you are told this is good news for Israel will your friends and family understand?"

Mary hears that she is not alone, but her cousin Elizabeth is also with child. Thoughts race through your mind when you hear that someone else has it as tough as you do! In Mary's case she was maybe 14 years old! And Elizabeth – gosh, she's an old lady.

Mary's response is hopeful given her own desperate condition. In her pregnant state she could have lost her fiancé, her home, her family's respect and her life. She tells the stranger that she has faith in a God for whom nothing is impossible. I paraphrase her response: "Let God have His way with me. I am His servant." It does not sound like the reply of a desperate teenager about to fall apart. It sounds like an

adult with broad shoulders able to hold on to her faith— a strong response despite possible cruel rejection by her culture.

Mary's reaction is amazing. Her indomitable spirit is recorded in a song attributed to her called The Magnificat. "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant."

How do we respond to unpleasant news? *"You have six months to live. You need surgery. We have to downsize, but hopefully severance pay will give you time to find another job.* The only thing that sticks with you after the shock of such news is one thing – usually family but rarely the phrase, "For nothing will be impossible with God."

It is hard to hear those words:

- In times when your employer makes your future uncertain and you more dependent on others.
- When you're forced to forgo a purchase of a plane ticket, a new car or a home just when you thought you could afford it.
- When your health declines and you can't enjoy the things you love to do.
- When you tell your children there won't be much of a Christmas this year.

And since these words are hard, your faith also begins to question: "Will God take care of us during these hard times?"

I haven't heard of much singing going on since the economy went south. Praise for God when troubling news comes is not the expected norm especially when Christmas is four days away. I try to imagine what it would be like for a family at Christmas when tragedy strikes and yet they face that time with courage.

A year before I retired a friend of mine and fellow officer tragically lost his 11 year old son in a backyard accident. I called Steve not knowing what I would say – I didn't have to say anything. His Christian faith was surreal – yet anchored in the knowledge that though the boy's death was unbelievable God would see them through. The memorial at his church was a celebration of that young life. Steve and his wife, Debbie, stood on the altar and gave a testimony of God's goodness, in that He had given them such wonderful memories with their son. They missed their son but were comforted in knowing he was face to face with His Savior. Their daughters incredibly were able to speak as well about their brother. The whole family had genuine peace in their hearts. There were no tears.

Again, I ask, how do people handle bad news in times of fear and uncertainty? I think dear Mary, Jesus' mother, has more to say to us than we can imagine. People like Steve and Debbie also inspire in the midst of a tragic loss. In tough times like these people learn it's important to be close to God. It's important to realize that from

God we can draw strength to face the challenges ahead. Let us seek God for strength and wisdom to know how we should live when crisis comes. Amen