

Blessing the Way

Luke 1: 39-56

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This time last Advent season, I was undeniably, unambiguously pregnant. Although I was ideally suited to play Mary in some church's Christmas pageant with minimal props or padding, I somehow managed to avoid that obvious typecasting. Instead I was able to sit anonymously in the candlelit pew, pondering the incredible journey Mary made to Bethlehem, her ankles swelling and back throbbing, and ponder, of course, the incredible journey laid out before me as well.

My husband Robert has often said that he wants to write a book about becoming parents. The title would be something like *"Everything Changes" and Other Vague Cliches That Are Nonetheless True*. I now wish I had a dollar, or maybe a nice long nap, for every time people with kids would say crisply, "Your whole life will change," a twinkle in their sleep-deprived eyes. Each time we'd nod blithely, and mentally roll our eyes—"Yes, no kidding."

It's such a silly thing to say, really—what is one supposed to do with that information? Get ready for it? How is that even possible? If life is really going to be *that* radically different, how does one prepare? Nonetheless, 'round about the 325th time I heard "Your whole life will change," I knew I needed to take action. I needed to find a way through this change. But how?

I wonder whether Mary was looking for a way through the change. After the angel departed, his words still ringing in the air, did Mary decide it was time to take action, too?

Because really, what is "Nothing will be impossible with God," but a more theological way of saying, "Your whole life will change"? What is, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you," but an obliteration of any notion of control? What is, "Elizabeth was barren and now she is with child," but a wakeup call that life as usual is over forever?

Many sermons have been preached and much ink spilled over whether Mary had a choice in the matter, a choice to let her whole life change, or not. Some traditions hold Mary up as a co-creator with God, indeed, the God-bearer, a full participant not only in her own destiny but in the course of human history. Other traditions wonder how much choice a pre-adolescent girl could really wield against the maker of heaven and earth. Those questions don't interest me right now. What interests me is that, after the deed is done, after the angel lays out the whole life-changing agenda, after Mary says, "Here I am, the slave of the Lord," she flees the scene.

Of course, she's not running away. She's running *toward*. Mary sets out "with haste" for Elizabeth's house. Something compels her to go, and to go quickly, eagerly. Perhaps it's to share this moment with Elizabeth, to shower her with congratulations, to marvel at the holy bizarreness of it all. Perhaps in the scariness of Mary's own situation, she figured it would do her good just to focus on someone else for a while. Whatever the motivation, Mary arrives, and the words of greeting are barely out of her mouth before Elizabeth is shouting with utter delight, saying,

Blessed are you among women!
Blessed is the child that you carry.
Blessed are you, who
believed.

In these words of blessing, Elizabeth testifies that yes, Mary's "whole life is about to change," but what does not change, what cannot change, what will not change, is God's goodness and mercy. God's steadfast love endures forever, which is to say, it endures any circumstance of life that might befall us. Certainly Mary, as she prepared to become a wife and a mother simultaneously, needed that blessing. Whether she was scared, or excited, or resolute, or merely curious, she needed to hear those words, that good God news.

And certainly last year, I, too, needed to hear the good news that lasts. Everything changes, but our loving God does not.

And so, like Mary, I ran. I ran to the company of others who could help me make sense of this change, who could help me name and celebrate this new identity of mother, who could affirm the goodness of God. Those others were trusted women who gave me a tremendous gift—a gift called a Blessing Way.

A Blessing Way is believed to be rooted in the Navajo tradition. It is sort of a baby shower, but with no baby gifts, no cake with pink and blue frosting, no games involving baby-food taste tests. That is to say, it is almost nothing like a baby shower. Now don't get me wrong, I love baby showers. There is nothing quite like receiving all those blankets, and clothes, and those improbably small socks, to drive home the realization that an actual child is on her way to being born. But in the Blessing Way, we declare: a mother is also on her way to being born.

My Blessing Way consisted of fifteen women who had gathered for the sole purpose of marking this transition in my life. They shared stories, offered experiences, and dispensed wisdom. And these dear friends, some with children and some without, gave me words of blessing for the journey into motherhood.

First, the group wrote an impromptu song, a lullaby about the peace and comfort of God, for me to sing to cope with the pain of labor and, afterward, to sing to the baby.

They each brought a word that represented a gift they wished to share with me and the baby—words like simplicity, grace, humor, and unconditional love. They named these gifts as they strung beads onto twin necklaces, one for me and one for my child. They laid hands on me and prayed for a healthy birth. And they accepted candles from me and agreed to light them when I went into labor, as a way of holding me in prayer.

I will never forget the gift of that time. As I sat in that place, soaking up the blessing (because what else can one do but simply receive it?), I knew that as important as this experience was at that moment, the significance of their blessing of me would only deepen over time. Even now, months later, I still sing the song of peace to Caroline. I read my friends' words of encouragement when I'm feeling off balance and uncertain. Mostly I remember the warmth of sitting among them: the wise friend who knitted as we all talked;

the one who spoke so eloquently and wisely of her own journey into motherhood, adding exuberantly, "It's *awesome!*"; the friends who traveled from far away to be there, and who have known me so long that few words were necessary to convey what they wished to say.

I can't help but see threads of the Blessing Way in the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth. Here are two women, each on the verge of cataclysmic change, reaching out to one another and finding refuge and strength—Elizabeth, graced by the presence of Mary; and Mary, lifted up in the blessing that bubbles forth from Elizabeth, and moved to sing her own song of faith and joy. And I feel certain that, over the course of Mary's life, those words of blessing brought her comfort. In moments of exhaustion and exasperation (surely she had them), in times of confusion, and perhaps even in that moment of unspeakable grief which is the stuff of nightmares for any parent—that blessing was an anchor. It was a place of orientation, a place on which to stand. No matter what happened, she was God's own. Come what may, her child was beloved and special.

But if I may be so bold, I believe that Elizabeth's blessing was more than a word of comfort. I think Elizabeth's blessing *called Mary into being* as a mother. After all, Elizabeth's words were a gift of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit which, it has already been told, would empower Mary to conceive and carry this child in the first place! We dare not try to separate these two events; they are both actions of the Spirit and, I believe, inextricably linked to one another. The words matter. The blessing matters. How can we believe otherwise and still worship a God who *spoke* the world into being?

On the day of my Blessing Way, I was two weeks away from my due date. For months I had been carrying this child, reading about how to care for her, wondering what she would be like, wondering what I would be like. Blessing Way or not, she was coming, and Blessing Way or not, I would be a mother.

Yes, and yet, as my friends left that night, I knew deeply that I was ready. Not in the sense of being prepared. Not in the sense of knowing what to expect. No, through their blessings my friends *called me into being* as a mother. Their blessings made it so! I cannot explain it. I simply know it. I *became* a mother even as I was still *becoming* a mother.

And that is the power of the blessing. I cannot separate the naming of the experience from the experience itself—not for me, and not for Mary. Elizabeth saw Mary for who she already was and yet still was growing to be. My friends celebrated my journey even as they cheered my arrival. And it is there, somewhere between being and becoming, somewhere amidst change and transition and Advent expectancy, that the blessing lies. It is a gift of the Spirit, and it waits for us—to find it, to name it for one another, and to allow it to change us.