

Advent I Reflection for 28 November 2021: "Prepare to Birth Hope!"

Genesis 16:7-13, Hagar's Annunciation story; Luke 1:26-38, Mary's Annunciation
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On one of my FB groups, I read this story this week. I wonder if it may speak to you?

A group member, Cassie, wrote:

The year my dad—who was a pastor at the time—was caught in his addiction, the Church leadership asked him and my mom to not attend the Christmas Eve service. The investigation was ongoing and they wanted him to step back while it happened.

What they didn't count on, I don't think, was for me to show up at the service.

I have a deep commitment to tradition so when my parents said we weren't going to the service, I resolved to go by myself. Under the weight of uncertainty and the fear of what I had suspected might just be a true accusation, I showed up to the candlelight service.

Families were there to celebrate, it was Christmas after all. I found my usual spot at the front and as the first carols rang out, my tears began to fall. I felt like an imposter. I was a cloud of grief and darkness amidst a cheerful celebration. I felt guilty for dampening the time of rejoicing

As I sat I found myself talking to Jesus. "I'm ruining your party," I told him.

It was his response in that moment that changed Christmas for me forever. He told me, Cassie, I came to that manger as a baby not for those in celebration, but for those in mourning. I am here for you. In this moment. Right here.

For the first time in my relatively easy life, I was tasting heartache (and oh if only I knew how much more would come). And it was there that Jesus showed me the heart of Christmas. Jesus stepped down to pursue the broken and the hurting and the lost.

If this year broke you down. Isolated you. Left you grieving or fearful or hurt. I want you to know that you don't have to muster up cheer. You don't have to feel like a downer in the midst of celebration. You can sit at the feet of One who is here for you where you're at right now. That's how Immanuel (God with us) works. It's God with us in the dirt, giving us hope in the face of despair.ⁱ

That, my friends, is the essence of the two scripture readings for today. We hear of two young women whose lives are turned upside down by news that they are pregnant. And both receive news that God with us, Emmanuel, will give them hope in the face of despair.

I have decided to journey through Advent, and possibly the whole Christian year for my remaining time with you, using *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church* by an African-American womanist theologian, Dr. Wilda Gafny, a Hebrew biblical scholar and Episcopal priest. She is a Professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School. It's a

timely new approach that invites us to look at scripture differently than we ever have before.

So, today, we begin Advent with the first annunciation in the scriptures, the Annunciation to Hagar in the desert, that she is pregnant with a son who will become the father of uncountable multitudes. And then we witness another annunciation, the announcement to Mary that she is pregnant, which raised some questions in her life and continues to raise questions to this day.

What jumped out at you in the first reading? For me, it was that Hagar ran away because she was being abused. Why was that? (She was getting uppity with Sarai, because she was pregnant with Abram's son and Sarai was now an old woman with no children. Sarai evidently became abusive to Hagar, jealous that she was pregnant, but also because Hagar was being horrible to her in flaunting the pregnancy.)

When Sarai complained to Abram about Hagar's disrespectfulness toward her, he told her, "You own her. Do whatever you want with her." Basically, Abram had sex with Hagar because Sarai told him to, so there would be children that she could adopt as her own. But he wasn't getting in the middle of the aftermath of that action. He reminded Sarai of her own agency in the situation. And Sarah then got so nasty with Hagar, that she ran away.

In both stories, Hagar and Mary are all but reduced to their biological functions. They ARE pregnant without consent and both WILL have babies. And yet, both are much more than baby incubators. They are theologians and conversation partners with the Divine. Hagar even becomes a philologist, quite literally a person who loves words and playing with their meaning. She calls God "El-Roi," El = God, plus a quality of God. In this case, the God who sees me.

These two stories are also evidence that God cares for those at the bottom of the hierarchies: women, the enslaved, foreigners. In Hagar's case, she was all three. An epic case of intersectional, or overlapping, oppressions.

Though Hagar was likely born into slavery, Mary took on the role of enslavement to God. We tend to like it better when it is translated as servanthood. But she is completely submitting herself into subjection to what God will do with her. Did Gabriel give her the option of denying consent to what would happen to her body? Nope. Gabriel announces what *will* happen. But there is also a sense of respect given to her, that she is at least being prepared for what will happen. Through her yielding, the first Advent comes to us. With it, we prepare for the second Advent, Christ's coming again.

We enter Advent as a sort of wilderness time leading up to Christmas. Consider Hagar's flight into the desert, prior to the birth of her son. Consider, also that a transitional ministry is often called a wilderness time, leading toward the birth of a new beginning. That is where we find ourselves this year as we begin Advent, moving on through the transitional wilderness, toward a congregational process to call a new

minister to walk with this community of faith with named values and a newly articulated vision for the ministry to which EPUC hears God calling it.

In her book *Wholehearted Faith*, Rachel Held Evans wrote, “Maybe the call of the wilderness is to ask us to think more deeply, more broadly, more adventurously, more boldly about the maybes.” Here we are at the cusp of Advent, an Advent that was always meant to be more about revolution than Hallmark moments, an Advent that leads us into a wilderness in which we encounter the Divine in startling, unexpected ways. The world was looking at redemption through power, and God sends a baby. Isn’t that just like God? To surprise us out of our complacency, to lead us to a view of wilderness that yields abundant grace and hope.

What will Advent be for us this year? While the season could be primarily focused on preparing for the baby Jesus, Advent is, in actuality, a bold invitation to enter the wilderness and open ourselves to the possibilities of God’s hope. God inserts the amazing into the wilderness of our lives. For Jesus, it was clarity of call and much-needed soul restoration. [For Hagar, it was a journey to new life and identity as the mother of multitudes, though not the mother of God’s chosen people. For Mary, it was also a journey into a new life and new identity.] Time and time again, God reinforces faithfulness even [when] we feel all is lost, leading us to life, always life.

The world is in a wilderness moment, in which enacted justice is skewed in favor of the powerful, in which wealth is equated with good and poverty associated with bad, in which greed becomes the goal of politics. On the surface, and perhaps even deep in our souls, there is a despair about these days. Yet the God of Advent reminds us that the wilderness leads to life, that hope appears in the most unlikely of places, and that the love of God lives on.ⁱⁱ

Please pray with me to end this time together: All-Seeing One, who seeks us out and calls us by name: Open our hearts to joyfully receive your annunciations to us, that we may bear your good news into the world, *birthing hope*, through the power of the Holy Spirit, who with Christ lives and reigns with you, one God, now and for ever. Amen.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Cassie Lynch, posted in a FB group, (Rev. Barb forgets which one!), on 13 Nov 2021.

ⁱⁱ Morning Reflection, “Almost Advent” by Melodie Haag Long for *Casa : An Experiment in Doing Church Online*, posted on Facebook on 22 November 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ Adapted by Barbara Fullerton from a prayer by Kristine Johnson on Wil’s blog <https://www.wilgafney.com/2021/10/25/advent-1-year-w/>