

## Pressezentrum

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Veranstaltung: **Bibelarbeit**  
Zeit, Ort: Do. 09.30 – 10.30, CityCube, Ebene 1, Halle A6, Messe Berlin, Charlottenburg (594 | E1)  
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*And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her. In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country.*

One of the parishes my family used to attend always had a living nativity one day a year during Advent ... it was a little manger scene in the parking lot you could drive by that was filled with straw and live animals and people dressed as Mary and Joseph and the other typical nativity characters. It was usually pretty cold so the shifts only lasted 20 minutes before new folks would step in. One year I was helping the different folks get dressed when a 7 year old boy came in from his shift and I asked him how he had liked being a shepherd in the nativity scene? "It was ok" he answered "but I think next year I think I wanna to be a pirate". You know ... the pirate that was at the birth of our lord.

Which of course is absurd ... but let's be honest, is a pirate more or less likely to have been at the birth of our Lord, than a Drummer boy? I've given birth to 2 children and in a far more comfortable environment than a barn so I feel I can say with absolute certainty that the last thing Mary wanted in her labor and delivery room was a boy with a drum. Even if he WAS playing "his best" for her.

Placing drummers and pigs and pirates in nativity scenes is obviously inappropriate if not just Biblically illiterate, but recently in one of my countless attempts to just get over myself, I had to admit that a drummer is not any less weird than a magi – those pagan Tarot card reading astrologer dudes from St. Matthew's Gospel. All that is to say, I wonder if maybe our over-familiarity with the story of Jesus' birth gets in the way of us understanding how weird it really was ... I mean, if it involves pregnancies by virgins, and old ladies from the hill country and if it involves soothsaying magi and rank shepherds and fearsome angels and God being born as a refugee in straw and mud then like, who's to say a pirate or a drummer is so weird?

It's just hard to believe that God would come to us in unlikely people and ordinary things, but in a way, it feels like the story of Jesus is, in itself, a story about God redeeming the whole world through making the impossible happen to the unlikely. **The story of Jesus is a story about God redeeming the whole world through making the impossible happen to the unlikely.** Which is important for us to remember since within just a few hundred years, Christianity had lost it's original dinginess. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century, our faith's origins of marginalized people and out-of-wedlock pregnancies and beloved prostitutes and dinner parties with all the wrong people and loving the enemy had all quickly given way to respectability and fancy robes and emperors and pageantry.

But if you really look at the story of God coming to us in Jesus, how it involved people of such low-estate and scandalous circumstances it starts to not make a whole lot of sense that today being part of church so often means checking at the door any part of you that would have fit in perfectly at the weird birth of our lord ... the parts of your story that seem scandalous like Mary's pregnancy or kind of disturbing like Elizabeth's pregnancy. It's weird how much we've sanitized this Christianity thing Because anyone who thinks that respectability and status and being nice is what the Gospel is about never really listened closely to the original cast recording. Which includes songs sung by pregnant teenagers and pagan magicians and pregnant old women. Songs of pulling tyrants down from their thrones.

See, I think that if we were deciding the respectable and church-y way for God to come among us it would have been for God to appear already powerful as a grown human in raiment and glory in some place really impressive, like Rome. Or, like, at the White House prayer breakfast. And so, in our version of God's great appearance on earth would be all the important people with titles like Emperor and King and Chief Executive Officer and they would dress really fancy with those amazing sash things. And if we were choosing who should to bear the message about God's coming it wouldn't be John the Baptist, it would be like, Dan Rather. Or someone with a low

authoritative voice, a strong jaw, and a neck-tie. And then God would come to dwell with us surrounded with all the people worthy to be a part of such an impressive event.

But that's not what we get in the story of Jesus. Because if God just acted in ways we thought made sense or that were respectable and predictable to us we could all just be our own Gods. Maybe even take 20minute shifts at it out in the cold, wishing we could be a pirate instead. But if history tells us anything, ... it's that we make terrible gods.

So here's the thing: God didn't come to us telling our story. God came to us telling God's story and God has always chosen the weirdest and most subversive ways of doing that.

I mention all of this because right about now that sounds like good news to me, because I am just so tired of our story.

I'm tired of populism and political posturing and over consumption and a world in which the tyrants seem to still be on those thrones.

I'm tired of my own self-righteous notion that I am not one of those same tyrants.

I'm tired of shootings and culture wars and genetically modified food.

I'm ready for God to show up with God's impossible story. I'm ready for some magic. To be enchanted again.

But this week I started to wonder if I miss noticing God's reality of the impossible and the unlikely because instead I'm focusing on the important.

*In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country .*

If we so often miss the way God is still incarnating the impossible among the unlikely, I think maybe its because we are too busy being distracted by what we think is important. And perhaps this was also true on the day Mary made haste to the hill country to visit Elizabeth as well. Perhaps the people Mary past by were so busy at their prayers, that no one noticed God walking among them since at the time, God was inside the womb of an insignificant peasant girl rushing to the hills to visit her kinswoman and that's not the kind of thing you pay attention to when you have *important* things to focus on. Mary certainly went unnoticed as she made haste to the hill country.

But this is exactly how God moves through the world – like the way Mary is making haste. She is quickly walking by us still. Hastily passing us disguised as our children asking us to play and in the street worn man on the corner whose eyes I am trying to avoid and in the woman who just made my coffee and Mary is walking briskly by carrying the Christ within her in more impossible and unlikely ways than we can possibly take in because this is God's story. And it is all around us. And the impossibility of it all is exactly what continues to enchant this world of ours in things we think are just ordinary.

We see the impossible all the time, you know, we just think that if we can come up with a suitable and rational explanation: scientifically, psychologically or sociologically then it's not really something God is doing. But that is just the hubris of a modern age.

In fact, we are so surrounded by miracles from God that we name them as ordinary, ordinary and not worth noticing...kind of like an unwed teenage mother.

So it's a good thing that God didn't come to us in Jesus telling us our story. Instead, God came to us telling God's story and God has always chosen the most unlikely and impossible ways of doing that.

<sup>41</sup>When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup>and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. <sup>43</sup>And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup>For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. <sup>45</sup>And blessed is she who believed that there would be\* a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

A year and a half ago, right in the middle of Advent, I sort of arraigned a last-minute urban retreat for 7 young clergy women who are a big part of my life. At a time of the year when they couldn't really afford to leave their lives, they all made haste to Denver because they also couldn't afford not to. We needed each other. We needed to not feel so weird, and alone ... we needed to laugh and eat and embrace and lay around telling stories.

While we were hanging out, the topic of parishioners who offer information about themselves came up.

See, people offer information to their pastors that we welcome but never actually ask for and sometimes I think it would be interesting to compile a list of these things.

Once someone – completely out of the blue said “Hey Pastor Nadia, I just want you to know that when I show up to church and I’m still a little drunk, I don’t volunteer to read the prayers or anything”.

One of the more heartbreaking ones of recent memory (which I have the person’s permission to share) is that, as someone who struggles with depression and anxiety, my parishioner said it’s hard to show up to church on Sunday nights because they usually spend all weekend isolating. So showing up there means getting dressed and leaving the house for the first time since they came home from work Friday afternoon. Plus, usually they are stoned.

I was like, look, we live in Colorado, so I pretty much assume everyone is stoned. Also, I promise you that you are FAR from the only person in the room for whom coming to church was the only thing they did all weekend. Not even close. You are not alone, I told them, I promise. You’re not alone.

But isolation is like, an epidemic in our culture. I myself can *feel* alone much of the time. Especially when I imagine myself to be so unlike others. The more terminally unique I fancy myself to be, the more alone I feel.

I think I feel the most isolated when I feel like no one understands me, when I feel like no one sees me, like I don’t match anyone else.

And on an existential level, yes, OK fine, we are alone. Meaning we are singular. No one is me and no one is you and every snowflake is unique yada yada. Yet, ironically, this is exactly what makes us the same. We all share the experience of being unique individuals who sometimes feel alone. This is exactly what connects us. And I suspect we tend to forget this. At least I know I do.

I thought of all of this as I reflected on this story of when Mary visited her kinswoman Elizabeth. I mean, I’m certain that were the angel Gabriel to visit me when I was a young teenager and tell me that even though I was a virgin I would become miraculously pregnant I would freak out. At the very least I would feel alone and like no one would ever understand me. No one would ever get how weird and amazing this all was. And so how good is God, that God gave Mary and Elizabeth to each other. Their crazy lives jagged in such a similar way. Elizabeth was totally isolated in seclusion. Mary was quickly going to be ostracized when the reality of her belly full of God grew under the scornful gaze of her small town. How beautiful that they had one another.

I was reading this story wondering, when the Angel said to Mary “You will conceive and bear a son. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.”

How would this story have been different if rather than running to go *be* with Elizabeth if Mary’s response was “Elizabeth? Whatever. I mean she’s so OLD. She’s like, my mom’s age!” and then she totally blew off the opportunity to connect with her kinswoman. If this was her reaction, she would have missed out on God’s provision of another person with whom to give and receive love and comfort. A mistake I’ve sadly made more than a few times in my life.

Which is sad because I believe it is our God’s desire that we be together, that we find love where we can in those whom God has given us. They were given the provision of another outcast with whom to make a bond. The angel had said to Mary “guess what – you’re not alone. Elizabeth has also conceived a weird Holy Spirit baby. Is it *exactly* what’s happening with you? No but close enough...go hang out with her.” So she makes haste to the hill country. A brave journey if ever there was one.

It’s a tender scene, when she arrives – these two women in their exquisite embrace; pregnant with the message and the messenger. It’s one of my favorite images in art ... the visitation of Mary and Elizabeth.

You could say that there were only 2 Christians in the whole world that day. Mary and Elizabeth. They greet each other, confess their faith (after all Elizabeth was the first to call Jesus her Lord)

Then John the Baptist does what might be the first liturgical dance – as he leapt in Elizabeth’s womb.

And then Mary sings a hymn about God’s mercy and the upturning of the social order. It’s as though this is the first Christian worship service. Two people for whom life has not been easy, but who have received mercy from God. Mary and Elizabeth – both inappropriately pregnant. One is too young and too unmarried and the other is too old and has suffered a life of shame for not having children (not for nothing, but ... any grown woman without children by choice or not by choice can attest to the fact that this is still a reality 2,000 years later, but I digress ...).

<sup>46</sup>And Mary\* said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup>and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, <sup>48</sup>for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup>for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. <sup>50</sup>His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup>He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup>He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup>he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. <sup>54</sup>He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup>according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

My church, like many others all over the world, shares in the practice of singing Vespers, or evening prayer. Vespers traditionally includes Mary's song, The Magnificat. So when we pray Vespers we join Christ's church and Christ's mother in singing about the wondrous things God has done in blessing us and in casting the mighty from their thrones and in feeding the hungry and sending the rich away empty

The church I went to in High School, and where my parents still attend most weeks (only in the morning, in the evening they come to HFASS), is a very theologically and socially conservative congregation. It's, suburban, white, upper middle class, and privileged. Very privileged. Well a few years ago, over 10 years after I became a Lutheran and began singing the Magnificat in Vespers and really loving how radical it was, I visited my parent's church and was amazed to see in the worship folder that the closing song was The Magnificat. All through the service I kept thinking "I can't believe that this wealthy suburban evangelical church is going to sing Mary's song of the poor being fed and the rich being left hungry". Finally the moment came. The congregation sang a praise music setting of ... and I can't make this up ... the *first half* of the magnificat. They proudly sang a nice praise song based on the Magnificat about how their soul magnifies the Lord who had looked with favor on them and that generations will call them blessed because the mighty one has done great things and holy is his name." And then they stopped. Their version of the song ended. Nothing about the powerful being cast from their thrones and God uplifting the humble of heart. Nothing about the poor being fed and the rich being send away empty handed. I was speechless. Well, not *exactly* speechless, since as I shook the preachers hand on the way out I said to him that I think it is theologically irresponsible to allow a profoundly privileged congregation to sing only the first half of Mary's song.

They may not know what the Magnificat is about, but I do. I felt pretty proud of that, since liberals see Mary's song a bit differently. Mary isn't a docile picture of obedience singing about how great it is to be pregnant. Mary is singing of nothing less than complete overturning of the social and economic order. She's basically a first century female Che Guevara calling for revolution. There's a reason why the magnificat is said to of terrified the Russian Czars. Because, the message is that if you find yourself rich and powerful then... watch out! This young little Jewish girl is not singing about a whole lot of good news for you. But the poor ... their time is coming because now the poor will be the rich and the rich will be the poor.

See? Liberals, like myself obviously understand the Magnificat and I feel pretty proud of that.

Except that this explanation sounds a lot more like retribution than redemption. Because when the oppressed become the oppressors then the oppression hasn't actually gone away. It's a zero sum gain. It's the exact same play with the same plot and the same ending...just with a different cast. Maybe what Mary sings of is not an endless cycle of retribution, but a total dismantling of the entire system. The child she bears is not coming to make the oppressed the oppressors. He is coming to disrupt the whole notion of oppression itself. And the way in which God accomplishes this in the birth of Christ is the same way in which God accomplishes this in the death of Christ: namely through vulnerable love. Divinely vulnerable love is the only way out of our cycle of power and oppression.

This all makes it a bit tough to pull off being prideful about knowing what the Magnificat is really about. Ironically, to be prideful about understanding the Magnificat is to not understand it at all. Because perhaps it is pride itself which causes the rich to be sent away empty. And not because God doesn't want us fed, **but because the rich don't realize that we're hungry**. Maybe in Mary's song the wealthy are sent away empty because we simply don't *need* God. We've got plenty of daily bread and seem to be able to handle most stuff that comes our way. But the truly hungry... carry none of these illusions of self-sufficiency. Yet it has always been our hunger which God feeds, and not our fullness. The rich are left hungry because in them there is no entry point for God.

Mary's song is perhaps not about the pride of being chosen by God and perhaps it's not about pride in the coming reordering of things when she and those like her will finally be the ones in power. Maybe the Magnificat is about the entry points of God's vulnerable love. The cracks into which the light of the Christ enters our hearts and enters our lives and enters our world. The entry points of God's vulnerable love are not our pride and our power and our self-sufficiency and our wealth ... The entry points for God's vulnerable love have always been our need, our poverty, our weakness.

It reminds me of the song of another prophet ... Leonard Cohen

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in.

It's the cracks that allow the light to enter.

These cracks in ourselves and in the world are entry points for God's redeeming work. The absurdity of Mary: Her insignificance, her poverty, her unwed femaleness, was the perfect crack for the light of Christ to enter. And her kinswoman Elizabeth, this inappropriately pregnant old lady from the hill country was the perfect crack into which the messenger of the light of God to enter.

Which means that the suffering in our lives and in our world which makes us question if God is really just, if God is really present, and if the Magnificat is still singable ... this suffering is right where God chooses to hang out. God has always been like this, and the ones like Mary, the ones who see that truth plainly, finally have all of the world's power. But this power isn't the kind we create for ourselves ... it's the power of brokenness and the power of humility. Power-over and retribution and vengeance and oppression be damned. This vulnerable love of God is what claims us and what gives us hope, real hope, in a way that nothing else can. Even in a world in which we are all very aware that the mighty still sit on thrones and the hungry are still hungry we still sing her song. Because Mary doesn't sing the Magnificat out of ignorance. I'm certain that the reality of empire and oppression and poverty and the abject powerlessness of her very self in her very context was not lost on the mother of our Lord. Quite the opposite. I think she knew. She knew that because of her lowliness and poverty and insignificance - because of this and not in spite of this that God was and is doing an entirely new thing. Never had the poor been so exalted than for God to slip into their skin insistently blessing the whole world in a radical way. She knew you simply can't speak of such things. They have to be sung.

<sup>56</sup>And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for 3 months.

I like to imagine them laughing and eating and embracing and laying around telling stories. How good is God that God gave them one to another. "Mary, and Elizabeth," says the Lord, "you are not alone".

The same is true of us. We are given one to another. We are not alone. We belong to God and because we belong to God we belong to each other and perhaps this is the message of the birth of Jesus.

After all, Emmanuel actual means *God with Us*.

And God becoming human was God's message to us: you are not alone.

I mean, we may think the project of religion and spirituality is to sand down the edges of our rough, irregular selves and our stories so much that we become nice, and smooth and holy ... and yet, I cant think of a better prescription for isolation.

Yes, individually, we have such snaggeled edges, such unique contours, but that shouldn't keep us away from others, because those cracks, those rough parts are meant to be fitted together with the other jagged-edged sinners of God's redeeming. After all, the odd, jagged parts of ourselves – our need for God is actually what connects us to God and to each other.

You are not alone in your suffering. You are not alone in your joy. You are not alone in your grief. You are not alone. God is giving us one to another, fitting our jagged edges together – Like a puzzle.

I mean, remember how Elizabeth says "blessed is she who believed God's promises"? Well, we too have a promise. It is that Jesus said where 2 or more are gathered he is with us.

Not where 2 or more are gathered and have the correct doctrine. Not where 2 or more are gathered and have the right kind of worship service. Not where 2 or more are gathered under the right flag. No ... just where 2 or more are gathered. That's all it takes. To be given one to another. To be with God. Like Mary and Elizabeth. Amen.

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