

Kirby Lawrence Hill
December 21, 2014
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday of Advent

A POWERFUL COMBINATION

We didn't know what to say. What words could bring comfort to a mother who just a day before had been watching her son as he was tortured to death? How in the world she kept from running away from such a dreadful sight, I'll never know. But I guess it was important to her that her son would be able to see that the one who had carried him, gone through birth pangs with him, and raised him would be staying with him to the end. My wife, Joanna, was upset too, for she also had a front row seat for the exercise of grave injustice and gruesome cruelty. To her credit, she would not leave Mary's side, but journeyed with her through what no parent should ever have to endure. As excruciating as it must be to die upon a cross, it has to be as painful in a different way to watch one's own child go through that kind of death-dealing torment.

Here it is, now just over twenty-four hours later. I've never spent a Sabbath quite like the one that just concluded as the Saturday sun went down. Never in our wildest dreams could we have imagined that this Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem would include such a devastating turn of events. On that first Passover, the eldest son was supposed to be delivered from the angel of death as it carried out what would open the way for the liberation of the Hebrew slaves. If only God had delivered Mary's eldest this time. When this is what happens to such a godly person, it's clear that another great liberation of God's people is needed. If only there were some signs of hope on the horizon, but our greatest hope that God was bringing about great change just died.

Much of Mary's community of support is back at home in Nazareth, so we stayed with her in these early hours of what I can only imagine will be a grief that will never fully conclude. Joanna and I both searched for something to say to her, but mostly we just listened as she went back over her maternal memories in-between her fits of sobbing. She even told us about an encounter with an angel of the Lord back before she was married. The angel had told her that she would conceive and have a child that she was to name Jesus. This messenger of God also said her son would be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God would give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He would reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his sovereignty, there would be no end. With what has happened in the last two days, it sure sounds like the angel misled her.

Mary told us more than once of the angel's first words to her: "Greetings, favored one, the Lord is with you." She said she was pondering what this meant when the angel went on to say, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." She told us there had been plenty of times since then when she didn't feel like she had been favored by God. Even though her cousin Elizabeth had been very supportive, the months of Mary's pregnancy as an unmarried teenager were difficult, with some of her own family and friends being very critical of her. She had thought her fiancé, Joseph, was going to leave her since he thought, with good reason, that she had been unfaithful to him. Finally he told her he would be staying with her. Then they had to go to Bethlehem right at the time when the baby was going to come. Not even having a decent place to stay when she delivered had certainly been frightening, but there were those unknown visitors who came who seemed to also understand that God would be doing something special through her son. That left her with much to ponder. However then, in order to protect the child from King Herod's murderous

ways, the new family had fled to Egypt and lived as refugees there for a while. They never knew what the next day would bring. Would the angel at that point still have considered her to be favored by God? Was the Lord with her even during those difficult times?

Mary told us she had not always understood the specialness of her son and the Godly mission to which he was called. When he was just twelve, there had been that mix-up where on another trip to Jerusalem, Jesus wound up not being with those who were traveling back to Nazareth. She and Joseph had finally found him in the temple teaching teachers about the scriptures. Jesus seemed surprised that they hadn't thought of that as the first place to look for him. Then when he reached adulthood and began his ministry, Mary was glad to hear the stories that got back to her, how he was bringing healing to those who were sick, reaching out to those who had been excluded, and sharing God's love and grace with all whom he met. She knew he had extraordinary gifts for teaching. He had always been a super storyteller. She was delighted when he got invited to come back to their home synagogue in Nazareth and she was proud when he stood before the congregation. She was even proud that he challenged them to recognize that God's blessings extended beyond those of Jewish heritage. But it frightened her when his life was threatened as a result of his proclamation about God's inclusive love. He always seemed to be on the road, going wherever there was need. Mary said she would have loved for him to have gotten back home a little more often, if he could have done so safely. It would have been nice too if he would have settled down at some point and eventually provided some grandchildren. Yet she knew God had been using him in amazing ways. She was glad for that. But now, with the crucifixion, it had all come crashing down. If an angel came to her now, calling her 'favored one' and telling her God was with her, she might be inclined to ask the angel to just leave her alone.

A number of times over the years, Mary had told my wife, Joanna, that when we allow our lives to align with God's plan, something powerful would happen soon. Mary had done just that – she had said 'yes' to what she understood to be God's will for her life. But now look at what has happened to her. She is devastated. None of this makes sense. There is so much about the world that needs to be different. Where could God be in all of this?

Now that the Sabbath is over, Joanna has gone with some other women who also witnessed the crucifixion to purchase spices and ointments to anoint Jesus' body. He had died just a bit before the Sabbath began at sunset, so there had been a rush to get his body entombed. She didn't think that Mary would go with them in the morning to honor his tortured body, but perhaps it will bring her a little comfort to know that others are carrying out that task. Poor Mary, told by an angel that she was divinely favored, and that nothing would be impossible with God. Is life over for her as it is for her first-born son? What will she do next? For her or for any of the rest of us, who knows what tomorrow will bring? Who knows what tomorrow will bring?