

In last Thursday's New York Times there was an opinion piece by author David Brooks entitled: *The Shock of Faith: It's Nothing Like I Thought It Would Be*. In it, he speaks of his personal journey of faith and the ways in which the Holy has broken into his life. He said it began with "scattered moments of awe and wonder, the kind that wash over most of us unexpectedly from time to time, when we have a sense that we are in the presence of something overwhelming, mysterious, and when time seems suspended or at least seems to blur. Each experience opened up for him a wider dimension of existence than he could have imagined, and aroused within him a desire be further opened up." He writes, "*Wonder and awe are the emotions we feel when we are in the presence of vast something that is just beyond the rim of our understanding.*", and that sentiment resonates with today's lessons, and the experiences of Elizabeth and of Mary.

Last September, the *i Cantori di Carmel* chorale, in which I sing, began rehearsing for our December concerts, and the main work was Johann Sebastian Bach's *Magnificat*. *Magnificat* translates from the Latin directly as "Magnificat anima mea Dominum", which means, "My soul magnifies the Lord". It is a complex, beautiful and challenging piece, just as the words of Mary are complex, beautiful and challenging, and has been a gift to sing.

While performing our concert this past Friday night in Santa Cruz, just a few movements into the *Magnificat* I suddenly felt unwell. Cold beads of sweat lined my brow and I was lightheaded. Afraid I might faint and not wanting to disrupt the entire production, I opted to sit down right there on the riser. Tucked amidst the legs of altos and sopranos, like a small animal in a forest, I rested my head on my arms, breathed slowly, and I listened. I listened as this music I had worked so hard to learn was being sung, to the audience, and now, to me. And what I heard delighted and surprised me: Mary's sacred song was newly brought to life through the genius of Bach and his masterful weaving of the voices that surrounded me:

*Fecit potentiam in brachio suo, dispersi superbos mente cordis sui.*

He has shown strength with His arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

And then, "*Gloria patri, et filio, et spiritui Sancto. Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.*"

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be, World without end. Amen.

God had broken in and it was heavenly.

It was for me one of those unexpected moments of awe and delight David Brooks writes of. Because, for just a few minutes I was able to forget my own physical situation enough to experience the bliss of Mary's words being glorified in a way I never could have imagined.

After a time I was able to stand and resume singing, and the next day found myself thinking about Mary, and Elizabeth, and wondering:

Might this have been how Mary felt as the angel Gabriel told of the role God was calling her to play in God's unfolding story? Was this how Elizabeth felt when she learned of the miracle of her pregnancy, or when the Holy Spirit filled her as she greeted Mary? What might they have felt as the Holy One in all its mystery, present yet just beyond their reach, nudged his way into their lives?

We began the season of Advent by reflecting on the importance and value of the darkness: how it is not to be feared, but is a space in which God meets and dwells with us, where if we can still ourselves (by our own choosing or by divine intervention), we may notice God's presence. Scripture speaks how new life arises out of darkness— God's universe being brought forth out of the abyss; the Israeli people crossing over into the promised land, and the Christ child, and John the Baptist, growing in their mother's wombs.

We then explored God's holy invitation to listen: to listen for God's voice and guidance as John did in the wilderness and Zephaniah did in his angel-imposed muteness; to find the courage within ourselves to not only listen and hear, but to take action.

And last Sunday as we surrendered our need for control into God's hands by worshiping in beautiful candlelight, Rebecca Miller reminded us of our longing and need for God. She asked, "how do the passions of your hearts align with God's desires for the world, and what small yet significant action might God be calling you to take, so that you, so that we, may be bearers of God's grace, justice and love to others?" This three-week journey now has brought us to this moment, to Advent IV, where we find at the center of our lessons, the Magnificat.

Mary's words are some of the most well-known and revered verses found in scripture, at once awe-inspiring and radical; daunting and hopeful; clear and yet, mysterious. They resonate through the centuries because as she extends praise to God, she also acknowledges God's character. God for her is the One who is just, who is merciful, who protects and defends, who keeps his promises, who has now

bestowed upon her the generational blessing of her ancestors. It is a lot to sing about!

Luke gives us the gift of witnessing the inbreaking of the Holy, not only in Gabriel's visit to Mary, but now in her visit to Elizabeth. Their encounter is intimate and personal, their lives and the journey ahead are intricately intertwined. They will share unexpected, miracle pregnancies that toss them under the scrutinizing eye of society, and soon the birth of sons who will change the world.

As they greet one another, the Holy Spirit fills Elizabeth, and she promptly begins to bear prophetic witness to the possibility and hope that is to be born into the world through Mary. What she offers is a blessing, a beatitude when she says: "*Blessed is she who believed that what was proclaimed by the Lord will be fulfilled*".

And right then and there, Mary is seen. Not only has she been seen and favored by God, she is now seen and affirmed by Elizabeth. It is out of her experience with Gabriel, and these words from Elizabeth that Mary responds and speaks, that she professes her gratitude and her belief that a fulfillment of God's word has indeed taken place.

Are we able to hear her? To hear what she has to say about who *she* knows God to be? Can we see how her deep belief in God informs her response and desire to join with God in God's divine plan? God has not called just any poor, young woman to bring Godself into the world. God has called a believer, and she has said yes.

In his piece, David Brooks speaks of a moment in 2013 when these little God moments suddenly accelerated. He writes:

*One morning in April, I was in a crowded subway car underneath 33rd Street and Eighth Avenue in New York (truly one of the ugliest spots on this good green earth). I looked around the car, and I had this shimmering awareness that all the people in it had souls. Each of them had some piece of themselves that had no size, color, weight or shape but that gave them infinite value. The souls around me that day seemed not inert but yearning — some soaring, some suffering or sleeping; some were downtrodden and crying out.*

*I had approached journalism with the vague sense that all people have a basic dignity by virtue of being human. But seeing them as creatures with souls, as*

*animals with a spark of the divine, helped me see people in all their majesty. Seeing them simultaneously as fallen and broken creatures both prepared me for their depravities and made me feel more tender toward our eternal human tendency to screw things up...And it occurred to me too that if people had souls, maybe there was a soul-giver. Once you accept that there is a spiritual element in each person, it is a short leap to the idea that there is a spiritual element to the universe as a whole."*

I would venture to say that each of us, at some time along our earthly journey, has felt God's nudge. For some, it will be a momentary thought, or recognition that slips away as quickly as it comes. For others of us, God will come to us in the loud crashing of the ocean waves, or in the pristine silence of the forest, or in the heavenly music of Bach. And for others still, God will show up in life-altering crux moments — times of illness, death as well as in our surprising, new beginnings. Perhaps you have had the gift of being seen, of being validated and affirmed by another?

It's just two days until we welcome the Christ child, who will embody all the hope of his mother, who will enter in, if only we make room. As you wait, I invite you to ponder this:

If you were to sing your own Magnificat, praising God for what God has done for you, and articulating who you know God to be, what is it that you would sing? What would you say?

May moments of unexpected awe and wonder find you. May God break in and shine forth light upon you. May your soul know its worth, and may it magnify the Lord.