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 Texts: Luke 1:39-56
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Visitations of the Heart: Hope Sings
The sense of wonder is a prayer.
 -Madeline L'Engle

The red sled stands upright in the corner of the front porch. It's carved seat of maple is smooth and ready for the first snowfall adventure. Peering closer you can almost see the broad hands of the carpenter who made it, aged with time, patience, and possibility. A symbol of the surprising visitations of the heart that can renew relationships and bring forth the hidden gifts of the Christmas season.

As the story goes, the brother and sister drove up to New Hampshire not long ago hoping to reconnect with a long lost family member. The siblings were nervous and chaffing at all that could go wrong. And yet, they dared to hope, too, that this time it would be different... They talked in the car about how many decades had passed since they'd seen their brother Jack. As they pulled into the driveway, fear filled them as they parked and tried to prepare themselves for whatever would happen next.

A knock on the door and they were invited into a cozy and charming living room. At first the host, known as Jack, their lost brother, didn't quite know who the kind and vaguely familiar faces before him belonged to...perhaps neighbors he hadn't seen in awhile?

"Hey Jack, it's me!" Said his older brother.

It had been 58 years since the brothers had seen one another. Nearly 6 decades. The reasons for the separation was forgotten for the day as unconditional welcome and buried love was re-awakened. The siblings hugged and marveled at their shared baldness and smiling eyes. Someone cracked a joke and they giggled together just like when they were kids!

As their conversation continued on, the siblings learned that Jack was a retired engineer and also a composer and lover of music, something he shared with his younger sister, now a retired music teacher. Jack was a Renaissance man of sorts.

They shook their heads in disbelief because for so long they'd worried about what happened to him, was he on the park bench, would he reject them or even remember them...??

Four hours passed in a flash as they shared tea and then a lunch of grilled cheese at a local cafe. No one brought up the past. Or the future.

It was gift enough to be in the same room with one another. To hug one another and marvel at the present moment and the hope it birthed in each of them.

Jack had as a young man of 18 distanced himself from his family, joined the Army and never wanted to be contacted or found...the family had tried to keep tabs from a distance but communication was always a one-way street. Over the years the absent brother was a ghostly presence at holidays, anniversaries and birthdays. Unfortunately, the parents died without ever knowing what happened to their son.

But on this day, their visit with Jack was no small miracle.

"Fear not", said the angel to Mary, "I bring you tidings of great joy." (Luke 1:30)

It is in this familiar story from the gospel of Luke that we follow Mary to her cousin Elizabeth's house. Another visitation we know well. Captured throughout art history down

through the ages, we can imagine their warm embrace at the good news and double blessings they shared. The unexpected new life leaping within each of them bonds them even further. They share a joy that must have been also mixed with fear and dread of the unknown.

Earlier Luke's chapter, after her visit with the Angel, we hear that young Mary "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart (v2:19); the angel's unexpected visit, the change of her life's plans with Joseph, and their new destiny.

"Yes" Mary had said, pushing beyond her fear.

"Yes" she said, to wonder and the new life within her Yes, to the uncertainty of what the future would hold.

It was what the poet calls the "awful and wondrous yes."¹ And it resounded in the hearts of Mary and Elizabeth, too! No fear lived here when they were together. And there was recognition made of wonder, joy and the safety they found in one another.

Christmas as we know is the season of stories: angelic encounters, dreams, foreign visitors, the birth of a child in a humble bed of hay, tales of Magi following a star. Christmas defies any quest for factual verification, whether from literalist preachers or listeners.

The wonder of the Christmas message transcends any explanation or doctrine that might be used to limit its mystery and power. We must give ourselves over to wonder and take our place in the story and in the scripture that lives on in my life and yours.

Writes author, Bruce Epperly, "Christmas reminds Us that we are all storytellers, if we allow ourselves to be, artistically creating new Christmas visions to be embodied in our world."

Ultimately, the Incarnation (translation, God is With Us) can be simplified into the affirmation that love is stronger than hate, life embraces death, and hope transcends fear.²

A sacred story and song like so many we listen to in this season can awaken in us the possibility of the impossible and the ever-present mystery of entertaining angels unaware. (Hebrews, 13.2)

While Mary is at Elizabeth and Zechariah's, Mary's voice is heard again this time in the praise and protest hymn, known as the Magnificat. Mary's song draws this intimate moment at Elizabeth's to a close. In it's words we hear echoes of the wisdom figures of old (from the matriarch, Hannah' song in the book of Samuel and the psalmist of Ps 113). Her testimony tells of a God who stands with the poor, lifts up the vulnerable, and changes the power dynamics of Empire.

Isn't that our hope, isn't that our song, too?

The young troubadour Inaugural poet, Amanda Gorman, has a new book out for this season called, *Change Sings*.³ It is breathtaking. As the narrative unfolds, she invites us to the song:

"I can hear change humming
In its loudest, proudest song.
I don't fear change coming,
And so I sing along."

Whether in the portrayal of blessed kinship between Mary and Elizabeth or in the healing embrace of a loved one in our present day lives, we are invited to remember that ours is a story-

¹ Jan Richardson poem, *What Comes After*.

² Bruce Epperly, *I Wonder as I Wander: The 12 Days of Christmas with Madeleine L'Engle*, (2018). Pg. 14

³ Amanda Gorman, *Change Sings*, (2021)

shaping faith. That the poetic wisdom of the gospel writers who wrote the Nativity scenes found in the gospels of Luke and Matthew, beckon us to listen again to the story and wonder how the Christ child can be born in us anew.

Where can we let down fear and let in new life? What are those holy encounters that point to new relationships, a new path or a new, changing world?

Before their final goodbyes, Jack asked his siblings to wait a moment at the doorway. A few minutes later, he came out bearing gifts, a handmade sled for his brother, and a CD of an anthem he'd composed for his sister.

With their hearts and hands full, the siblings walked back to their car and drove away. Utterly amazed at what they'd seen and heard, the road home opened before them.

May the sacred stories and songs of this Advent season intersect with your own. May it infuse you with the Spirit of all this is possible in the dark as we seek the changing light together. May hope sing in your heart and mine.

Amen!

**Bulletin cover: Malak Mattar, artist <https://assembly.malala.org/stories/artist-spotlight-malak-mattar>. For more information, visit @malak_mattar_artist

