

Coaxed out of isolation

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

December 10, 2023

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

We have had that experience, haven't we: people who have significant mobility issues understand it; people who cope with mental illness understand it; caregivers understand it; people relegated to the margins of community because of gender, or age, skin colour or sexual orientation, they understand it.

The feeling of isolation. I remember my mother talking about being a young mother with her first born, that was me. They were far from family and my father's work required him to regularly fly out of province, thus leaving a mother and her newborn alone.

This Advent, as every December when our culture has brought Christmas cheer to us since just after Hallowe'en, we are tempted to put away our authentic feelings of grief, loss, even trauma, and instead purchase a product to find happiness. Why don't we take this moment of Spirit and faith and resolve to resist those forces, let's be counter cultural! Let us do the spiritual work of leaning into authenticity.

If we really think about it, we ALL understand the experience of isolation – whether we are 4 or 94 years of age; because isolation was mandated, the law of the land not that long ago. It was only to be a few months, but the pandemic turned out to be much longer. Its affect on us is still not well understood. The fear of the unknown, a virus not at all understood at first. We lived isolation in every sense of the word.

Now that experience had its blessings, didn't it? Those of us who worked, we could arrive at meetings in shorts or pyjama bottoms, because on video meetings we only saw a bunch of faces on our screens. What strange times. They still feel strange, if we really ponder it.

Video conversations offered the luxury of seeing people we loved, but, for some of us, the technology lost its new car smell. Isolation left us feeling disconnected, from hugs and the immediacy of gathering in person with those we loved.

Hold onto that embodied memory, as we ponder Elizabeth. Last week brought us the story of Zechariah, an old priest who is told by an angel that his wife, who is beyond child-bearing age, he is told that Elizabeth is pregnant with a special child who will bring many people back into God's Love – his name will be John. But Elizabeth, the story tells us, went into seclusion for 5 months.

Dr. Wil Gafney explored that reference to Elizabeth, and translates the phrase (Luke 1:24) as "and she hid herself for five months." Gafney tells us that the language for Elizabeth's seclusion is strong and should be clearly expressed in that way.

Why did she isolate herself? Was she consumed with worry that something terrible would happen? Was she protecting herself from the scrutiny of her neighbours? As an older woman, was she having a really difficult pregnancy?

We hear Elizabeth proclaim, though, in spite of her dismay at finding herself pregnant at retirement age: "This is what God has done for me, God looked favorably on me and

took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.” She is going through difficult times, but she soldiers on.

We can be sure that Mary experienced her own isolation, being on the opposite end of the life-spectrum from her cousin Elizabeth at the very same time. Pregnant-but-not-married would certainly have evoked gossip among neighbours and even family. Mary sets out on a journey, perhaps she was alone.

The two pregnant women come together. (Luke 1:45) Luke has Elizabeth describe her young cousin with the Greek word for “happy” or “blessed” – Makarios – which more accurately translates as “fortunate.” Makarios is how people in ancient time described the rich folks who enjoyed good fortune and carefree lifestyles. That’s ironic, a word usually used for rich and carefree people, being attributed to Mary, a self-described “low-status servant.” Makarios is the word repeated in the Beatitudes for blessed: (Matthew 5): Remember... “Blessed are the peacemakers” “Blessed are the poor in spirit.”

For those of us who are struggling with our Hallmark-branded culture at Christmas, foisting happy smiles on all of us, might this moment of connection between two previously isolated women put joy in perspective for us? A Joy that comes, often upon us unawares, in the midst of grief and isolation? It is this connection with Elizabeth that provokes Mary to utter her famous Magnificat: *My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.*

In my work this past week, I have come across a wonderful book, by author Ross Gay, and wonderfully entitled: *The Book of Delights: Essays.*¹ I want to leave you with his words as I hope you ponder the power of connection – and it doesn’t have to be connecting with another person, it could be connecting with nature, connecting with a great book or movie, or connecting with the Divine in prayer or meditation. Connecting can connect us with the joy that is already in us, or around us, waiting for the connection.

So the last words to Ross Gay: *I have no children of my own, but I love a lot of kids and love a lot of people with kids, who, it seems to me, are in constant communion with terror, and that terror exists immediately beside . . . let’s here call it delight—different from pleasure, connected to joy, . . . somehow—terror and delight sitting next to each other, their feet dangling off the side of a bridge very high up.”*

Amen.

¹ The Book of Delights: Essays. Ross Gay...