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Third Sunday of Advent, December 13, 2020
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Bridgewater

Considering we just moved to this area about a year ago, there was much work to be done both inside and outside of our house. The inside was first, so that we could inhabit it, and then I began to move to the outside. With weeds that had not been pulled for what seemed like years, grass that grew faster than I could cut it, and invasive “plants” that were taking over everything, the oversized bushes finally got cut back late this summer. Actually, to give credit where credit is due, my father in law came from Newtown with his buddy when we were conveniently not home, and in 90 degree weather, despite our pleadings with him to wait till it cooled down a bit, these two 80 year old men chopped them all back. A good sized haircut they needed, he said.

A few weeks ago, when it was a bit warmer still, I noticed this lone growth, this flower emerging from one of them. Reddish pink, green new leaves around it among trees scattering their leaves and humans feverishly preparing to get enough done so we can be inside for the winter.

This flower has become my aspirational flower, my protest flower, my flower that reminds me that there is new growth in years too desperate for growth to be possible.

Mary's words to us today, for me at least, ring new again, in the ways only Scripture can feel fresh no matter how many times we read it. Mary, you know, was a single mom in a time when single mom's weren't allowed to be. She was on the verge of being stoned by the state, she was confused as to how she could be pregnant, let alone how this child would be called “Son of God,” as we learn in the verses before her song. Trusting, she obliged to whatever insanity God was doing with her.

So she visits her cousin Elizabeth, and the child, Son of God, leaped in her womb, and she realized this was the fulfilment of what had been foretold.

This, however, did not make sense to the world around her any more that it made sense to her, and her life, and Son of God's life, was in danger, before he was even born.

So she sang. A song that makes little to no sense. A song that was ancient, modeled after the song we hear in Isaiah, a song aspirational for years and years, for thus it needs to

continue to be repeated. I never thought about how aspirational it was, until this year. With all that didn't make sense, with a government surrounding her based on an economy that was ruled by an elite class that placed their trust in opulence and decadence, run by slave labor, where 1/3 of the population were slaves, or 20% of the empire, where 80-90% of the people lived on subsistence income, where a small educated class was made of landowners, government officials and religious leaders, she sang this song about her belief in this God who has placed her life at risk by impregnating her, she sings this song about her belief in this God who scatters the proud, brings down the powerful, those who run the economy she suffers from, from their thrones, lifts up the lowly, feeds the hungry. She sings a song in direct contradiction to the reality around her, knowing that her God is way bigger than the tragedy of life everywhere she turns. Like John the Baptist, her nephew who we meet in the Gospel of John today, she is the "voice crying out in the wilderness."

Is this the kind of hope we must find in years like this? Hope that, as poet No Land spoke of after this most difficult of years, is "stupid, idiotic, impractical, irresponsible, a little out of touch radical hope?" That the songs we must sing are those that point towards what could be, how God could be moving among us in the middle of this trauma that God did not cause but God is still certainly present in, providing opportunity, pathways, to rearrange the ways that are not working in the ways we have organized our lives?

As I work with congregations of all sizes and denominations throughout the country, we are together asking amidst it all, how is God moving among us? We are forever changed, due to the ways our routines have been ripped out from under us, due to the ways our traditions have been forced to change, due to the ways that social unrest and systemic disparity have hit us front and center. As my bushes outside got a hard prune, so have we.

We won't be going back to the ways that we were doing it all before, for that is never actually possible. The question now isn't really when can we get back into the routines from before, but more how is God moving among us in ways that we couldn't have seen before, or that are new now?

I begin to explore that question first by asking how I personally, how each of us personally have been changed. My life does not look 100% different than it did in December 2019 but perhaps it is 80% different. What relationships have I let go during this time, that turns out weren't very important, and what relationships have sustained me that I wouldn't expect? What do I really need and what did I think I needed? Where am I

finding joy--knowing that these days it is in the little things: a brief conversation with a stranger, early morning dog walks with breathtaking sunrises and dew-kissed feet, a sole flower blooming in the wrong season. Where is God pruning and what is growing in its place?

Where is God pruning in the lives of your fellow congregants, and in the neighbors around you, in Bridgewater? Take stock, listen, consider all the facts. This will indicate a slight bit of what God has in store for us.

The other night I dreamt of the bushes outside our living room window. I dreamt of a very, very cold night, filled with ice and snow, and I walked outside and not only one bud was blooming, but the entire yard, full of pinkish red flowers. These luscious signs of life that grew overnight, ready to greet the morning, to greet humanity with the protest of bright pink in December. Completely careless, impractical, improbable flowers showing off in the wrong seasons before me.

Author Arundhati Roy has said this “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”

Breathing, through the voice is crying out in the wilderness. Through Mary’s aspirational song to us today. Through the ancient words of the prophet Isaiah. Through the flowers fighting in the winter. For the hungry to be filled with good things, For the mourning to be comforted, for justice to be loved, and as the earth brings forth shoots, where gardens will spring up as the Lord God causes righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Amen