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Even when she struggled, Mary believed

Peg Ekerdt | Dec. 18, 2013 Spiritual Reflections
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She sits on our table as I hasten through Advent. She is a carved image, a pregnant woman, her hand protectively covering her womb. She is a symbolic rendering of the young Mary, mother of Jesus, who is introduced to us in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel.

In this Advent season, in the midst of a culture that on a yearly basis usurps this holy season and fills it with more things to do than any "angel singing o'er the plains" ever imagined, what does Luke tell us about Mary that can shape our Advent practice?

With certain wisdom, the Scriptures on several Advent days feature Luke's first chapter. We hear Gabriel tell Mary that she will conceive and bear a son. We understand her initial fear and marvel at her acceptance: "Be it done to me according to your word." We travel with Mary to visit her cousin Elizabeth and hear Mary's magnificent praise of the greatness of God, who disperses the arrogant and fills the hungry. In response to Mary's question, "How can this be?", we hear the angel's promise that the Holy Spirit would come to her and the power of God would surround her.

All that is familiar, but there is one particular line that I seem to read as if for the first time, and it stirs my imagination: "Then the angel departed from her" (Luke 1:38b). It is a simple sentence that tells us the angel did not stick around. The angel promised that the Spirit would remain, but Mary was left alone. Sinless but human, she would have to determine how to live each day in response to this amazing news.

I imagine Mary looking around the room after the angel departed and wondering what in the world she should do next. Did she seek her mother? Did she go to Joseph? Did she begin to plan a visit to Elizabeth? Did she remain alone, quiet and stunned? There is no record of those first moments, but further reading of Luke's Gospel gives some indication of what she did in the days and years thereafter.

She married Joseph, she raised her son and she remained faithful to the "Yes" she gave the angel on that Annunciation day. We know that she was amazed at how people reacted to her son (Luke 2:33) and she struggled when her unapologetic 12-year-old caused his parents worry and anxiety (Luke 2:48). We know, as well, that when she did not understand her son, she "kept these things in her heart" (Luke 2:51).

And we know that she stayed with him. We do not know the precise moment when she fully understood who he was, but we find her named and among those first disciples who gathered in that upper room after Jesus' resurrection and ascension (Acts 1:14).

In this Advent season and in every season, Mary is a model of faith for us. For it is Mary who believed and allowed God to work through her to change the course of humankind. It is Mary who gave birth to a Son, the long-awaited messiah. And it is Mary who said yes to the unknown and opened her very being to the movement of God in her life.

We will probably not change the course of humankind, but we are no less called to be open, to say yes and to allow God to work through us.

On a recent morning, I encountered a friend dressed in heels and a glitzy skirt and jacket. There was a drug pump at her waist, and a buzz cut distinguished her head. She has friends who call her the "chemotherapy poster child," as she shows up for every treatment dressed to party. Source of inspiration to all who know her, she told me God did not cause this cancer, but she knows God is with her every step of the way. She is our Advent poster child who has embraced the unknown and opened her being to the movement of God in her life.

On this day, as I reflect on my own Advent practice, I ask for the grace to pay attention to the movement of God in my life. I ask for the will to say yes to God in every event, small or large, joyous or difficult. I consider how God might work through me this Advent day and pray that I may allow it to be.

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