

Sermon for Advent II 2012 Canticle 16 Luke 3:1-6 "Second Trimester"

There comes a time in every woman's pregnancy when she has to face the hard truth: she can no longer fit into her clothes. That cute little muffin-top bulge has morphed into something larger, firmer, rounder than her skinny jeans can accommodate. If last week was all about the subtle hints that change is coming, we are now in the land of no subtlety whatsoever. It is increasingly obvious to anyone with decent vision that she is expecting.

And one of the things that happens when a woman reaches this stage of pregnancy is that your body is no longer your own. Friends and strangers alike feel it is just fine to pat your baby bump, and are surprised if you pull back from their hand. Everyone - and I mean everyone, including the bus driver, the post office clerk, and the girl checking out your prenatal vitamins at Walgreens - has a story to tell you. It may be about how the way you're carrying the baby means you are going to have a girl. It may be someone's speculation that you sure are old - or young - to be having a baby - did you plan it or was this a surprise? it may be about that person's delivery - oh, the labor was forty-eight hours, so don't be brave and try to go without an epidural, because you don't want to wait until it's too late to get pain relief. Suddenly your pregnancy is not your pregnancy, it's everyone's, and they sure do want to tell you about it!

This shouldn't be a shocker. After all, it's been happening for eons. I wonder if Eve's daughter-in-law got lectured by the first woman: "You think you have problems? You should have tried delivering with no one around to help except your useless father-in-law...and we had just been kicked out of Eden, and we didn't know squat about having babies, except that warning from the Big Guy that it would be labor. Labor? Hah! He didn't know the half of it."

I expect the women in Nazareth, once they realized that Mary was pregnant, did the same thing.

And it makes sense, in a way. Our bodies are no longer simply our own when we are pregnant. We have a passenger on board, and we have to do all sorts of things to accommodate the passenger's wishes. We should eat healthy, and get some exercise, but not too much, and not be stressed (hard to do with all the stories every woman we know is telling us), and did you know that dying your hair when pregnant is bad for the baby? That's one of the things I heard when I was expecting...

But for Mary, it was even more complicated. The child in her womb wasn't an ordinary child, this was the Son of God. Nobody knew that part of the story, and for better or worse, that meant that there was no advice that could be offered for her particular situation.

And talk about your body not being your own! The child within was owned by the whole world. The story of the child had been trumpeted by prophets for generations. He even had his own personal announcer-in-chief, his cousin John, who was at this point also not even born yet...but his task was already laid out for him - tell people that the Messiah is coming.

This is the piece of the story that we sometimes forget. This baby in the womb, who had not yet drawn a single breath, was the fulfillment of a much larger story that people had been hearing about for centuries. There were already expectations about what this child would mean and who he would be.

An expectant mother sometimes bristles at the suggestions that well-meaning family and friends offer about her pregnancy and her baby. "Oh, I'll bet that baby is going to be a quarterback just like his daddy! All the girl babies in this family are redheads. Betcha that little one will be a doctor just like her mom." How dare they? This is her baby! He or she will be exactly who he or she is, not someone else's projection of who the baby should be!

But what if your child is the fulfillment of an ancient promise, one that everyone has heard for as long as anyone can remember? What if, when the child is kicking, you cannot help but think "this is the Messiah who is tumbling around within me." What if you wonder what raising such a child will be like? what if you think, "all these ladies around the well giving me advice and snickering because I was pregnant before Joseph married me, if they only knew the story?"

What if there is no frame of reference for what is happening, and all you can do is roll with the passage of the days as your belly grows larger and your heart and soul love this child more and more?

It is clear what is happening now. It isn't like the first trimester when it was all a secret and a mystery. Mary, like all second trimester mothers, looks healthy and fruitful and happy as she moves through her days. But perhaps she is already feeling the separation. Her child, like all children, is not entirely her own. Her child, like all children, will be born from her body and begin the long journey to adulthood and the leaving of the family home. But unlike other children, his path is planned, has been for a long time, in ways that most people did not fully understand, but that she senses in the deepest part of her heart. So even now, well before the child is due to be born, she must face the fact that it is not only her body that is not her own anymore, her child is already not her own either. It is bittersweet, but she knows her part. She will nurture him, birth him, raise him, and then let him go. All mothers must let go, we know. But her letting go is shaded by the knowledge that his future will be, let's say, complicated. So remember Mary this week, in the fullness of her pregnancy, with rosy cheeks and a happy smile, and just the faintest hint of what is to come etched on her brow.

Amen.