

Rev. Kate LeFranc

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## “Waiting for Emmanuel”

Isaiah 7:10-16

Matthew 1:18-25

A few weeks ago, a Belgian charity called the Mimi Foundation launched a campaign called “If Only for a Second.” Their inspiration was a conversation with a patient, diagnosed with a terminal cancer, that before the diagnosis she used to be so carefree, but now it was impossible not to think of the disease looming always above her head. And so they set out to create a moment of joy that had nothing to do with cancer.

Collaborating with a French design firm, they worked with 20 cancer patients, telling them they were going to get a makeover – but the catch was, they had to keep their eyes closed the entire time. And they set out on the work, taking photos, doing sketches, choosing the perfect wig, and then styling them all down to exacting detail – in the most extravagantly ridiculous way possible.

And so, when the moment came, a photographer captured their faces in the exact moment when they saw their new red mohawk-with-dreadlocks combination, the mile-high updo with ribbons and fringed bows woven in, the carefully-coiffed mullet, the teased-out white afro with one giant pink bow.

It is pure silliness. And their faces are captured in a moment of shock and joy and laughter that has nothing at all to do with their cancer, even if only for a second. My favorite image is a slender, delicate woman, who in the interview before her makeover is so obviously burdened with the enormous weight of worry, and in the moment before she opens her eyes rests her mouth in a deep frown, creased and droopy with pain. And then she opens her eyes and sees an enormous Marie Antoinette wig on her head, and her whole face lights up with surprise and it is as if this whole weight has been lifted from her shoulders with the ridiculous glimpse of hair that doesn't even fit into the frame of the photo, and long dangly earrings to match. And her eyes light up wide and she is *almost* even smiling.

Our story today is about Joseph of Nazareth, of the house of David. He is a righteous man, we are told, working as a carpenter and engaged to be married to a girl named Mary, and mostly everything is going well for him. He has a life, and a plan, and a career. Expectations. And maybe that plan fills him with joy and excitement, but I kind of doubt it. He strikes me as a man who is mostly just going along with the way things are supposed to be. Probably his father was a carpenter, and perhaps his father before him. He is living his life in the best way he knows how.

But suddenly, everything changes. Mary becomes pregnant, and in that world even more than our own, a young unmarried girl becoming pregnant is a scandal and a disgrace, and by law she should be executed by stoning. Joseph, a righteous man as we are told, creases his brow with sadness and worry and opts for the quiet solution. He is trying to be gentle, to avoid the worst of public disgrace for her, by leaving her alone with the shame of a child without a father. It is the right thing to do, according to the law.

These words keep striking me as I read this story – Joseph’s quiet righteousness. It seems to say so much about him, in a way I think a lot of us can identify with. We don’t want to stir things up, but we are trying to do the right thing in small ways, quiet ways. Those things may not always satisfy us – they may not quite touch the yearning that we feel for something different that we can’t quite articulate – but they make sense, these quiet right things.

The prophet Isaiah spoke to a people who were yearning too, although theirs was a bit louder and tinged with the threats that hung over their heads of invading armies and famine and persecution. When Isaiah first speaks these words of a child who will be a sign to the peoples, he is speaking directly to King Ahaz of Judah who is preparing for an attack by the armies of Aram and Israel, who have joined forces against them. And the sign that Isaiah promises is a sign that life will go on in Judah; the salvation for which Ahaz is searching is a person who will literally *save them* from military invasion.

The promised child won’t do that, exactly, but he is a sign of hope. And, somehow, that hope is also a hope for the destruction of their enemies. Those two kings who threaten Judah will be taken down, their lands deserted and their livestock full of milk but with no young to drink it. Somehow, the hope that is promised is a hope that comes in the midst of fear, of war, of famine.

It is hard to say what that hope looks like, exactly. And so it’s appropriate, somehow, that the sign is a young child. We put all our boundless hopes and expectations and dreams on that child – on any child – but we know all too well that as that child grows up, they will be their own person, beautiful and talented in their very own way, which so often has nothing to do with the plans and expectations we had for them.

A child is a perfect sign of hope for so many people – life goes on! new things are being born! – and yet it is a hope over which we have remarkably little control. That child in whom we place our hopes will grow to be a defiantly independent teenager (who could not care less about our hopes for their lives!) and then later their very own adult, who can look back at those expectations placed upon them and then decide for themselves how God is calling them to live, whether or not that life fulfills our expectations in the ways we thought it would.

And that really is Emmanuel, isn’t it? God With Us is not something we have very much control over at all. We see, sometimes, a spark of divinity (of holiness or of rightness) among us, and then try to follow where it leads. But that path will be full of twists and turns, and it will no doubt lead us onto paths that defy our plans for our own lives or of others’ expectations for us. That messiah was neither what anyone expected (a baby born to a poor family from Galilee, of all places!) nor exactly what was hoped for either – he hasn’t really saved us from the war and famine and awful things we still do to each other.

But sometimes, like Joseph, all we can do is to hold on to those quiet hopes, and listen for the whispers of God’s messengers, suggesting something – like being the adoptive father of a miraculous divine child – something that is just absurd and unexpected enough to be the work of God among us. He had a choice between the quiet life he knew, a life which was conventional and more or less what was expected of him, and following a crazy suggestion, in a dream, from a voice he thought was God’s.

And this is a choice we make in small ways every day. Mostly we choose routine, expected things, because those are comfortable and more or less certain, and whether or not those choices truly fulfill us and feed our souls with joy, at least we know more or less what will happen. And because those routines are *mostly* okay for us – we mostly have secure jobs and homes and enough food to eat – our yearning for something new is more like a quiet and unvoiced ache than a cry of anguish.

But we still yearn for a messiah, somehow, don't we? Usually for us the one we're waiting for is not a literal savior who will vanquish our persecutors and swoop us off to a place of milk and honey, but more like that impulsive friend whose ideas always turn out to be good ones – who suggests skipping school to go cook a banquet in the park, and everyone in the city comes and enjoys a perfect and joyful meal together. Perhaps the messiah we're searching for is simply one who says, quiet righteousness is boring – let's do something miraculous instead.

My favorite definition of a miracle is a moment when “the way things *should* be” triumphs over “the way things are,” even just for a moment. And we could do that too, couldn't we?

The incarnation of Jesus defies our logic in just that way, and it's a beautiful thing. I love the way writer Madeleine L'Engle describes it in her poem, titled “First Coming”:

He did not wait till the world was ready,  
till men and nations were at peace.  
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,  
and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.  
He came when the need was deep and great.  
He dined with sinners in all their grime,  
turned water into wine.

He did not wait till hearts were pure.  
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.  
To a world like ours, of anguished shame  
he came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,  
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.  
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh  
the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane  
to raise our songs with joyful voice,  
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,  
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

What crazy ideas might God's messengers be whispering in your ear this season? You never know – you might end up being a parent to the Christ child. Or it might just lift your burdens and make you smile, even if it's only for a moment.