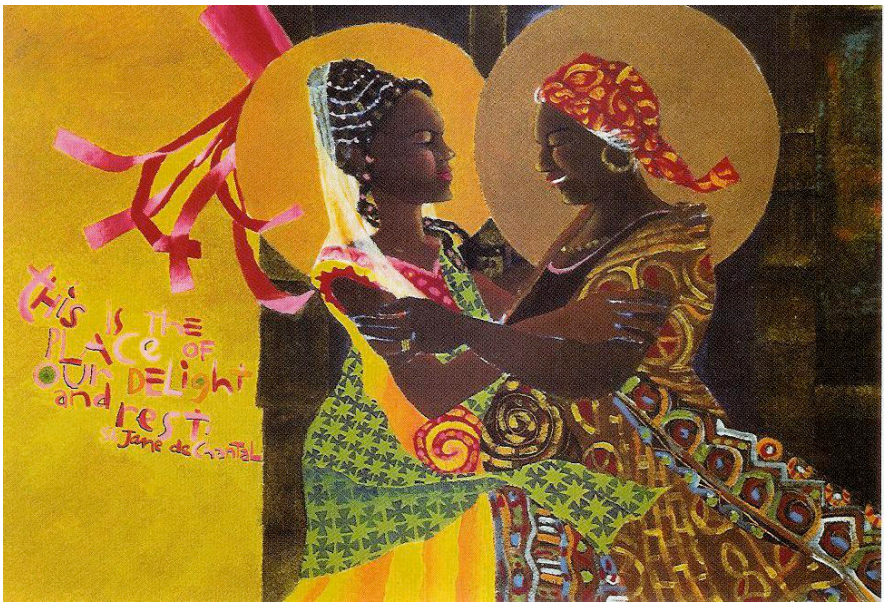


on Mary and Elizabeth

Robert Steiner

Scripture reading: Luke 1:39-45

Contemplating a biblical story helps me to be more attentive to the many layers of meaning of an event or an encounter. Some stories function as a magnifiying glass, bringing into focus an aspect of reality that I would have otherwise missed. Above all they present me with the challenge to think of my response in the light of God's graceful spaciousness. I am forced to pause, to be slow to judge, to be quick to encourage, and to trust a bigger story at work. And I never stop learning about the gift of re-framing, re-imagining, re-covering, and re-storing.

I am drawing on Mary Oliver's poem "heavy" to describe the journey from shame to hope in the story of Luke 1:39-45. There is a similar movement, in three parts, in both the poem and the biblical story. The main themes in the story resonate with the development of the poem, and the insights unfolding in the poem echo the wisdom of the biblical story.

With Haste

We read about Mary embarking on her journey to visit Elisabeth. But why "with haste"? Is it about her eagerness to see for herself that the angel's message is true, that Elizabeth is in fact also pregnant? Is it about celebrating togther an unexpected pregnancy? The one too young and the other too old to be pregnant. Two relatives drawn towards each other in wonder and gratitude? Or does "haste" rather indicate a state of restlessness and anxiety? To be unmarried and pregnant at the age of 13 or 14 would have been a major scandal. What would her parents, her betrothed, her Rabbi, or her community say? Soon everyone would find out. There would be public shaming and humiliation. She would be an embarrasment to her parents and a disappointment to her loved ones. It would be very understandable for her to seek a moment of respite, a place of refuge; to confide in a friend and confidant. The news of her pregnancy are a weighty matter.

Woven into the unexpectd promise of new life are a woundedness and powerlessness that make me shudder. The annunciation to Mary leaves little space for her agency. There is a sense of being overpowered by the divine that makes me deeply uncomfortable and resonates with some of the worst expressions of patriarchy. The latest statistics show that more than 3000 girls between 10 and 14 years old gave birth in South Africa in 2017. And more than 100 000 teenagers became mothers in the same year. Such unwanted pregnancies are the result of unequal gender power relations. And the continuous danger of being infected by HIV/Aids puts the mother and her child at great risks. And so while one could argue that the notion of a virgin's birth is a subversive provocation to patriarchy, the portrayal of an overpowering God weighs heavily and overshadows the more liberative elements of the story.

The weight Mary carries at this moment is not physical, but psychological. Does one dare to allow oneself also feelings of grief, of sadness, of dying in the context of the promise of a birth, a new beginning? Mary Oliver's opening words of her poem "heavy" speak straight into Mary's situation:

That time
I thought I could not
go any closer to grief

without dying

I went closer,
and I did not die.
Surely God

had his hand in this,

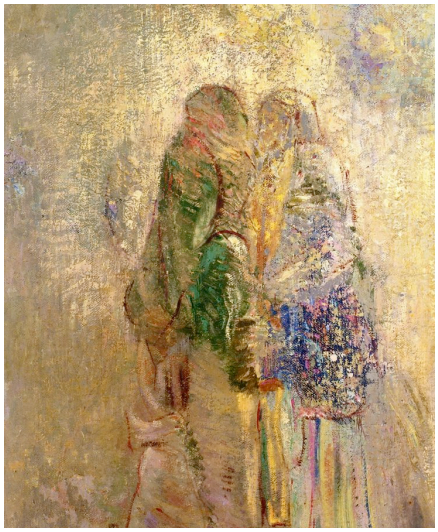
as well as friends.
Still, I was bent,
and my laughter,

as the poet said,

was nowhere to be found.

Elizabeth

When Mary finally arrives, having travelled through the mountains all by herself,
her expectations are not disappointed. She is welcomed with open arms. And prompted by the kicking off the baby in her own womb, Elizabeth begins to bless Mary and the child in her womb. Artist have tried to capture this moment of support and affirmation. In several paintings we see Mary almost falling into Elizabeth's strong arms and Elizabeth upholding and raising her. If only we ourselves could learn to become more attentive to the deep steerings within ourselves, to know when we are



called to embrace and bless, to stand in solidarity and to show compassion. Long before her son John the Baptist would "prepare the way of the Lord", Elisabeth, in her own way, manages to raise the valleys and lower the mountains, calm the anxiety and lift the spirit.

In Mary Oliver's poem it is her friend Daniel who offers valuable advice and re-frames the situation. He is neither punitive nor moralizing:

Then said my friend Daniel,
(brave even among lions),

"It's not the weight you carry
but how you carry it –
books, bricks, grief –
it's all in the way

you embrace it, balance it, carry it

when you cannot, and would not,
put it down."
So I went practicing.

Have you noticed?

Elizabeth becomes Mary's Daniel. Over the next three months she will help Mary to move from the "what" to the "how". Removed from her familiar surroundings and the pressing demands of everyday life, she is able to practice how to carry her child. I am thinking of a picture that I recently saw. It portrayed a young woman in the midst of a group of three women: A nurse, a social worker and a counselor. The counselor had recently shared with our congregation how this young woman living with HIV/Aids - thanks to the intervention and care of those three women - managed to give birth to a HIV/Aids negative child. They all, in their own way, became an Elizabeth, assisting with professional advice and upholding her at a time when the young woman was going through serious self-doubts and feelings of guilt and shame. But the story does not stop there. Through the networks of our congregation a teacher in Germany heard about the financial challenges the teenager is facing as a young, single mother. And so she rallied her school class to organize a fundraiser for her. Is it pure co-incidence that the teacher's name is Anne, the very name later legends attributed to Mary's mother? Another Elizabeth who fulfills a mothering role to Mary, supported by a group of teenagers whose solidarity reaches far beyond their own familiar home. And all those small initiatives and interventions form part of a bigger Advent story, the ancient journey from exile to homecoming, promised and rehearsed by the prophet Isaiah, and reaching a new level presence with Christ's coming. When deserts start to blossom and new paths are forged through arid land, the ancient promise has once again found roots in our lives.

It becomes clear that the success of the journey from the "what" to the "how" depends on people we can trust not to judge us, but to stand with us and help us to grow into assuming responsiblity, the ability to respond, and to identify our sources of strength. Faith communities at their best offer such a network, which functions as a safety net, especially in contexts where the State is not consistent in its support of the most vulnerable. The young mother is now busy "practicing", as we ourselves keep learning and practicing Elizabeth's script. It is important to remember that this new role does not call for perfection, but compassion.

Magnificat

The result of Mary's and Elizabeth's friendship is extraordinary. The song that follows after our story, also known as the Magnificat, is the direct result of this encounter. Without Elisabeth there would be no song, no Magnificat, no bold vision of reversal. The song marks a decisive turn in the series of events. Having been silenced by shame, Mary's voice now demands our attention and is clearer as ever. It is daring and visionary, of prophetic candor and of invigorating chutzpah. It is through Elizabeth's solidarity that Mary is able now to fully own her calling. But she is no longer the shy and submissive Mary who willingly surrenders to the will of God, as portrayed in Luke's annunciation scene. What a fascinating turn. And yes, we have noticed what practice can do. Mary Oliver's poem now transitions into a celebration of life which is not oblivious of pain, yet always expectant. It speaks of a laughter that I have witnessed myself, puzzling and interrupting the cadenzes of grief:

Have you heard
the laughter
that comes, now and again,

out of my startled mouth?

How I linger

to admire, admire, admire
the things of this world

that are kind, and maybe

also troubled –
roses in the wind,
the sea geese on the steep waves,
a love

to which there is no reply?

Mary returns from the mountains with a song of resistance. In his reflections on the opening chapters of the Gospel of Luke David Lose notices a strong presence of songs and interprets them as an expression of both hope and resistance. Apart from Mary's Magnificat, there is Zachariah's song in response to his son's birth. Finally his tongue is loosened. The shepherds are surprised by a choir of angels singing about a new peace on earth. And also the elderly Simeon, who is blessed with meeting the Christ child in the temple, responds with the famous "nunc dimittis". They are songs that mark an unexpected turn, signal a moment of awe and wonder, and extend an invitation to the reader to join this choir of young and old, of earthly and heavenly voices, to harmonise and continue singing to a very different tune from the beating of colonial drums and the marching sound of Roman troops. Songs of hope and resistance not unlike the wellknown African-American spirituals which originated with the slaves working on the fields of America's South. Songs which kept their spirits alive, and fueled their hope for God's justice to prevail. "Swing low" was not just about the final crossing over into a place called haeven, but even more a secret code to communicate that the chariot into freedom would wait at midnight at the agreed location. And the song "Wade in the water" was not only a reminder of the healing powers of troubled waters, but also a warning to make sure to use the river beds on your flight to the North. Walking in the waters would make it more difficult for the blood hungry dogs to hunt you down. In a similar vein the civil rights leaders employed the power of songs like "We shall overcome" to support their fight for equality. Lose refers to the "velvet revolution" in Leipzig in 1989 and scetches a moving scenario:

"... for several months preceding the fall of the Berlin wall, the citizens of Leipzig gathered on Monday evenings by candlelight around St, Nikolai church - the church where Bach composed so many of his cantatas - to sing, and over two months their numbers grew from a little more than a thousand people to more than three hundred thousand, over half the citizens of the city, singing songs of hope and protest and justice, until their song shook the powers of their nation and changed the world. (Later, when someone asked one of the officers of the *Stasi*, the East German secret police, why they did not crush this protest like they had so many others, the officer replied, 'We had no contingency plan for song.'!)"

Also the South African struggle for liberation cannot be conceived without the power of song. The documentary *Amandla: A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony* (2002) hauntingly describes the role of music in the struggle against the injustices of Apartheid. "Amandla", the Zulu and Xhosa word for "power" empowered the oppressed and exploited with a battle cry which did not have to end. In the documentary the well-known South African singer Sibongile Khumalo is quizzed about the famous anti-apartheid folk song "Senzeni Na" ("What have we done?"), which gained popularity during the 1960s among anti-apartheid activists. Her response is intriguing: "Can you imagine, that's one line ... 'what have we done?' repeated over and over and over ... I mean, come on. You have no other option but to stand up and go and fight." Researching South Africa's struggle songs Anne Schumann identified two significantly different periods. Building on Berthold Brecht's insight that "art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it" Schumann managed to show "how the political use of music in South Africa changed from being a 'mirror' in the 1940s and 50s to becoming a 'hammer' with which to shape reality by the 1980s. In South Africa, music went from reflecting common experiences and concerns in the early years of apartheid, to eventually function as a force to confront the state and as a means to actively construct an alternative political and social reality."
I linger and admire this long tradition of songs of resistance: They make strong the hand. They emanzipate the Marys and Elizabeths of this world from mental slavery. They help us to practice the "how". And they invite us to keep rehearsing these songs of freedom. Let us not stand aside and look ...

"'Cause all I ever have
Redemption songs
Redemption songs
Redemption songs" (Bob Marley)

Sources of inspiration:

Mary Oliver's poem "heavy" enabled a metonymic reading of the biblical text. Rick Morley framed the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth as a journey from shame to blessing.(http://www.rickmorley.com/archives/2154) David Lose speaks about singing as an act of the resistance in the opening chapters of Luke's Gospel. (http://www.davidlose.net/2015/12/advent-4-c-singing-as-an-act-of-resistance/) And Anne Schumann's article on "The Beat that Beat Apartheid: The Role of Music in the Resistance against Apartheid in South Africa" (in: Stichproben. Wiener Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikastudien Nr. 14/2008, 8. Jg., 17–39) recognized the important and changing role of music in the struggle against Apartheid. (https://static1.squarespace.com/static/543c2809e4b00b9cbab96575/t/54e3b210e4b088f368d1579f/1424208400320/Role+of+Music+in+the+Resistance+against+apartheid+in+South+Africa.pdf)