



Expecting in Advent

By Mary Vaccaro

In an ancient tale, a disciple asked an elder, "Holy One, is there anything I can do to make myself enlightened?" And the Holy One answered, "As little as you can do to make the sun rise in the morning." The surprised disciple asked, "Then of what use are the spiritual exercises you prescribe? The elder replied, "To make sure that you are not asleep when the sun begins to rise."

The Sunday Gospel readings this Advent begin with Jesus challenging us to stay awake, pay attention and be ready to recognize the signs of God in our midst. The second and third weeks feature John the Baptist, a prophet in the wilderness, urging us to repent, to prepare a smooth way for the Lord. On the fourth Sunday, we hear the story of Mary and Elizabeth; the very first disciples to recognize and welcome Jesus. Mary, whose body would nurture and give birth to the son of God, and Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, the prophet and preacher who would first announce the adult Jesus as Messiah. These two women certainly knew how to be awake for the rising of the sun.

How did they know this? What made them so spiritually aware? As Elizabeth asks, "How does this happen, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" As I ponder why God favored Mary and Elizabeth, it occurs to me that God chose them because they knew how to be pregnant. Now that might sound like a crazy idea. After all, what does knowing how to be pregnant mean? Either someone is or she isn't! But here are some things I've observed about pregnant women - some things that pregnant women know.

- A pregnant woman knows how to make a home of her body for the new life which grows inside her; a safe, hospitable environment in which to eat, rest, grow and be loved.
- She knows how to love her child even before she knows its gender, what it will look like, what kind of person it will be. A pregnant woman knows how to love a mystery.
- A pregnant woman knows how to sacrifice and accept change; allowing her whole being to be stretched, twisted and transformed! Imagine making room to accommodate another person within your body!
- And while all of this is going on inside her body, a pregnant woman knows how to prepare a loving, nurturing home into which her child can be born.
- In addition to making preparations, a pregnant woman knows how to wait. As anxious as she might be to relieve the physical burdens of pregnancy, she would never wish for her child to be born before he or she is ready.

- Finally, a pregnant woman knows that there is a life-giving power beyond the physical union between her and her husband. She recognizes their partnership with God in this act of creation. It is with hope and trust in God that she is able to prepare and wait for the birth of her child.

These are some things I have observed about pregnant women. But what does this have to do with God choosing Mary and Elizabeth? More importantly, what does this have to do with the rest of us?

I believe that God calls each of us to know how to be pregnant. I imagine that, like me, most women who have never been pregnant have probably thought a lot about what the experience might be like. It is only natural for females to ponder this. I don't know if most men have given this subject much thought, that is unless they saw that Arnold Schwarzenegger film that came out a while back. But if you think I am just being silly, writing about men becoming pregnant, imagine how silly it was for God to choose a virgin and a post menopausal barren woman for the job! Yet as the angel, Gabriel said to Mary, "With God all things are possible."

As unlikely as it sounds, God wants each of us to know how to be pregnant. I believe this is true because I believe that, like Mary, each of us holds the potential to nurture within and bring to birth, the new life of Christ in the world. And I believe that, like Elizabeth, each of us holds the potential to nurture within and bring to birth, new life that recognizes and points to Christ present in the world - new life so strong and aware that it leaps up and kicks us, from the inside out! God calls all of us, male and female, to know how to be pregnant. And we can do this by:

- making of our lives an environment in which Christ can grow and be loved.
- loving Christ, even though we might not know exactly what form he will take when born in our lives, by loving the mystery of Christ.
- sacrificing to make room for Christ in our lives and by allowing ourselves to be changed.
- both preparing and waiting patiently for the birth of Christ in our world.
- having faith and hope in the power of God's Spirit, whose love in our lives allows Christ to be born among us.

In this way, all of us can know how to be pregnant. Like Mary, we can bring Christ to birth in the world; like Elizabeth, we can recognize and point to Christ among us. Blessed are we who believe that there will be a fulfillment of what was spoken to us by the Lord. We will certainly be awake for the rising of the sun.