

MARY'S KIND OF HOPE

Luke 1: 39-56

Maggie MacDonnell was entering an impossible situation. In 2010, she agreed to become a teacher in one of the remotest parts of Quebec's north – an Inuit community named “Salluit” with a population of 1400. After generations having survived isolation, residential schooling, underfunding and highly limited resources, the community faces staggering rates of addiction, sexual abuse, teen pregnancy, a housing shortage, food insecurity and a suicide crisis. Just this year the tiny schoolboard called an emergency meeting to address the 13 teen suicides and counting. So what difference could Maggie make? What difference has she made since she arrived? How could she last and feel hopeful, struggling against a hopeless avalanche of gloom and doom?

Maggie's situation is not unlike that of Mary and Elizabeth in our gospel reading. What's their situation exactly? The two women are Israelites. They're part of a people oppressed and dominated by foreign powers and a corrupt aristocratic class of leaders, religious authorities and a king Herod. Elizabeth and Mary are peasants and they're women. What can they hope for other than bearing children to decent husbands who are not abusive and will work hard so that they can all survive? How can they hope for any meaningful change and difference in the social order of things and in their personal circumstances? To add to this hopeless situation, Elizabeth has been unable to get pregnant and is now, finally, pregnant with one child in her old, virtually post-menopausal state. Mary, on the other hand is but a mere teenager, unmarried and pregnant and her fiancé is not even the father. At least that's the story. How can hope mean anything concrete under such conditions?

And yet, out in the remote Judean hill country, hope is being sown in miraculous ways. For Elizabeth and Mary, it all has to do with the special children they will give birth to. Elizabeth's child will be named John and he will become a great prophet heralding a new time of change for his people. Mary's child will grow up to fulfill his destiny as messiah-king. What will that mean for Mary and Elizabeth? What will that mean for the people of Israel? What will that mean for the world? What difference can it all make especially as John will end up executed in prison, and Jesus crucified?

Well, somehow, Mary is full of hope. It doesn't make sense. On the surface of things, nothing's changed. Things look as hopeless as ever. And yet, Mary is so inspired by the possibilities she sings a beautiful poem that has been put to music many times: “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant... for the Mighty One has done great things for me... God has

shown strength... God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly and oppressed; God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty...

Mary's world is a world of great injustices – where the proud, powerful and rich have what they have by exploiting the masses of lowly, hungry and powerless. She envisions a time where all this will be changed. Accountability will prevail and justice will reign. But even though the kingdom of heaven may be a place where divine justice, peace and abundance reign, what hope is to be found in the kingdoms of this world?

Sadly, too often, we measure the success of change, reform and making a difference in quantitative terms. How decisively will the fortunes of a whole people change? How many people's lives will be changed. How will all the corruption and violence and inequality of resource distribution get righted? How many of the oppressed will be vindicated and how many of the oppressors will be brought to justice and removed from power? And if we cannot see any tangible or significant numerical change, do we give up hope and settle back to the same old, same old indifference, apathy, helplessness and defeat?

Here's where faith in the kingdom of heaven and in eternity can make a concrete difference in the resiliency and tenacity of the energy of hope we can find in this world now. The difference in how Mary and Elizabeth will live, the difference in how they will raise their children, the difference in who these children will become, all of this may not change the world on the surface quantitatively, but from a transcendent point of view, they are on the right side of eternity and connected to something much richer and more abiding. Faith in the beyond is not some escape, nor is it some denial of reality here and now, nor is it some crutch to lean on for weak people. It is an energizer to fight for change in the name of love even if power and force have the upper hand in terms of numbers and visibility.

Mary is declaring that she has seen eternity and she believes in the miraculous. She will live her life from now on positioned to be an instrument of hope and change, however it comes visibly and invisibly, in actions and in heart-felt transformation. Is there any better way to live than on the right side of eternity? Do we, here and now, buy into the hopelessness of our age, feeling helpless to be part of any real significant change? And do we then escape into consumerist thrills and comforts during Christmas by giving up on the possible joy and hope we can experience through compassionate service and generous giving, even if it doesn't change the world visibly?

Well, preacher, what could eternal kind of joy and hope look like here and now this Christmas? Maggie MacDonnell, mentioned above, has also been singing a song like Mary. But her poetry is not in words, but in teaching and engaging with young people. As already mentioned, Maggie is a teacher in the far north; a place where hopelessness and deprivation

have had a foothold for a long time. And yet, she was being recognized here in Toronto at a global conference of teachers and asked to give the main speech. She won the coveted award, beating out other amazing teachers from all over the world. What difference has Maggie made as a teacher in the far North? When she agreed to go North, she recognized that she herself was not indigenous and in fact represented the colonial majority who created residential schools. She hoped to learn and provide an alternative example of teaching, and maybe last a year or two, knowing this itself would be difficult. But 8 years later, her life has changed in ways she could never have imagined. She realized that unless education in the classroom began to involve the children themselves and the whole community, no change would happen. In time, involvement also included the mayor, councillors, elders and parents. They also focussed on some big community projects and did a lot of fundraising.

One project was the building of a fitness centre for the community recognizing that fitness, physical health and mental health are all connected. Hunters used sleds to pull treadmills and elliptical trainers over the frozen tundra. They also created a running club. Physical activity is a key ingredient in helping build resilience. It is also a tool in suicide prevention. Another project was a community kitchen where students make meals for elders, pregnant women and those who don't have enough healthy food, as well as creating an in-school nutrition program where healthy snacks are made for all students. Other programs focus on developing life skills for girls and young women so that they stay in school and graduate. MacDonnell has also facilitated relationship building with a broader range of students who commit themselves to each other, checking in and communicating when the tug of despair and the lure of suicide as a way out grabs hold.

But has all this made a difference? I already cited that this year MacDonnell's school board has been addressing the crisis of youth suicide in the double digits and counting. MacDonnell herself is also frustrated with the lack of sufficient attention and action by governments. And yet, MacDonnell's love for her students has been reciprocated with their love for her. Many claim that her involvement in their lives has made all the difference in their personal health and their educational goals and ambitions. Changing the life of one child is changing the world one child at a time. We may be pushing against a larger tide that may seem hopeless. And yet, from the perspective of eternity, changing the lives of one child at a time is how we experience the joy and hope of Mary. Making a change in one person's life in the name of the Christ child born in us is a connection with eternity.

Mary, Elizabeth and Maggie MacDonnell, could have given up. They could have set their sights on day to day goals and simple lives. Changing the world is for others to do and sometimes, real change is a hopeless affair from what we can see and hear in the news all around us. Yet what hope and what joy can we really experience in life if we are not connected to eternity somehow? Whether we claim our connection to eternity through our

Christian faith as followers of the babe of Bethlehem, or whether we do what we do not aware of any larger connection to anything beyond, faith and hope that lead to compassionate engagement and committed generosity is what Christmas is really all about.

So what about you and me? How will we make Christmas come alive for ourselves in a spiritual way? What will hope and joy feel like for us? How will Mary's song and the examples of human beings like Maggie MacDowell become an inspiration for us? May we meet the Christ-child anew this Christmas in a way that counts... not in big splashes of showy change, but in the depths of our heart and soul, where the eternal is found... Amen.