

Push It

December 13, 2020

Even those of you who don't know me well probably have picked up on the fact that I have a silly sense of humor—it's part dad joke and part Monty Python. I regularly tell my husband that I'm funny, and his standard response is, "YOU think so."

So, I think Scott was secretly pleased when I forgot the Bluetooth speaker at home as we drove down to Mequon for our daughter's birth earlier this year. He was relieved because I had told him that my plan was that when our surrogate went into hard labor, I wanted to loop the song "Push It" by Salt-N-Pepa until Josie arrived. Scott, our carrier, and our doctor all agreed that it was okay that this facet of our birth plan didn't go as expected.

Nonetheless, as our preparation for Christmas draws us in to Mary's story this week, I invite you to reflect on what it is that you're birthing, what is gestating in you, in the dark, inmost parts of your being, what grace is God knitting together in your soul that you're almost ready to push out into the world? Push it. Push it real good.

Meister Eckhart, the 14th century German mystic is quoted as having said that, "We are all meant to be mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born." I love this, because it helps us to step beyond Christmas being the anniversary of the historical birth of Jesus, and in to what I call the "so what?" of the faith.

In normal years, when the December calendar includes open houses and round robins and all sorts of celebrations, invariably someone learns that I'm a pastor and then corners me, trying to scandalize me by talking about how Jesus probably wasn't born on December 25, that the Christmas Star may have been the great convergence of Jupiter and Saturn, or that Christmas is a Christian co-option of pagan solstice celebrations. By the point that this litany is shared, the individual is usually pretty deep into their cups, and so it doesn't even register to them that: One, I've heard it all before. Two, I agree. And most importantly, three, a birthday party for Jesus of Nazareth isn't all that important in my spirituality.

Now that I've scandalized you all, let me back up. We know that Jesus was a historical figure, and within that, his birth is important because it creates the foundation on which he was able to prophetically teach, preach, heal, and redeem. But for you and I today and the claims that our faith puts on our lives, giving birth to grace and mercy and compassion and mutuality is much richer than a birthday party.

As we reflect on the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke today, the passage in which we read of the Angel Gabriel visiting Mary, and Mary consenting to be what orthodox traditions call the Theotokos, or God-bearer, we're invited to contemplate what of the divine is growing inside of us, what of the divine is almost ready to be pushed out of us that will bring good news of great joy for all the people.

Driving in the car and doing my Christmas shopping in the stores are the two places that I usually hear the majority of the Christmas music I consume. Since I'm not doing either of those things this year, there are a lot of carols I haven't heard, including one of my modern day favorites, "Mary Did You Know?"

Now, among my colleagues, this song gets a lot of flack. My fellow ministers joke that it's the ultimate "mansplaining" carol, and that, of course, Mary knew—she had a conversation with the Angel Gabriel about who her child was going to be and then sings about it with Elizabeth! Those critiques aside, it's a pretty, haunting melody that reminds us, as so many carols do, that Jesus' entire life, not just his birth, is to be celebrated.

This song came to mind for me last month as we lost yet another important player in the 20th century civil rights movement, Lucille Bridges. Even if you don't know Lucille, you probably know of her daughter Ruby. Ruby Bridges was the little first grader who integrated the New Orleans public schools six years after the landmark Supreme Court ruling *Brown v. Board of Education*, Topeka, Kansas. Her sweet little image is forever seared into our minds in the famous, harrowing Norman Rockwell painting of her carrying her books and a ruler as she is being escorted by the National Guard past a wall scrawled with racial epithets.

The story goes that the New Orleans schools were slow to integrate, and the NAACP actively recruited African American families to break the color barrier. In response, New Orleans instituted a test to determine whether the children recruited by the NAACP could attend what were then all-white schools.

Only six of 164 children passed, and Ruby was the only one to attend Frantz Elementary School that year. As her mother walked her to school, protesters hurled rotten tomatoes and eggs at them, spit at them, and screamed things that no one, especially a little first grader, should ever hear.

They spent the first day in the principal's office for their safety. Only one teacher in the entire school was willing to teach her. All of the white families withdrew their students from that class, and so for over a year Ms. Barbara Henry taught Ruby, alone in her classroom, as if she were teaching an entire class. Because of real safety concerns, President Eisenhower had Ruby escorted to school all year. The Bridges needed guards at home, Ruby's father lost his job, and her family was banned from shopping at their local grocery store because their presence was "too disruptive."

Ruby's mother, Lucille Bridges, died last month at the age of 86. That means she was just 20 years old when she risked her Ruby, her everything, her sweet baby girl, for all of us. Sure, she was hoping for a better life for Ruby, but she also knew that school integration and civil rights and social justice were critical for all of us.

Just 20 years old, the daughter of sharecroppers, Lucille Bridges knew, knew that oppression was real.

- She knew that bigotry was ugly.
- She knew that she was taking a gamble with her precious, precious baby.

AND

- She knew that all of God's children are created equal.
- She knew that her baby girl was made in the image and likeness of God.
- She knew that if she didn't risk that which she held most dear in this instance, her baby girl, and all of us, would suffer even more.

Inevitably. Like Mary of Nazareth, Lucille Bridges knew. And in making the hard decision to risk her darling for the greater good, she gave birth to a grace we're still celebrating, a grace

we're deeply indebted to. There was a God-given spirit of justice, a spirit of hope, deep within her being that grew and took shape until they became tangible, real, incarnate because she pushed them out of herself and into the world.

The portion of our Gospel that I read today is often called the "Magnificat" because of the phrase "my soul magnifies the LORD." What a beautiful prayer! I often wonder how I'm magnifying the LORD. What of the LORD I'm being called to magnify more profoundly.

But I've always been a little saddened by the phrase two verses later where we read that God "has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." I'm saddened, because the idea that Mary is lowly just breaks my heart. It doesn't fit into the spirituality that I know in the depth of my being, that all of God's creation are loved and cherished by the divine.

That is, until I read Ana Velasco-Sanchez this year. Velasco-Sanchez is a *mujerista* writer and activist who suggests that, rather than lowly being how God understands Mary, lowly is one of the social labels she's been carrying around. Mary is female, brown, a refugee, an unwed pregnant teen, and rather than these things profaning her, Velasco-Sanchez suggests that Mary's role in salvation history suggests that God is telling us that those social barriers are not divine, that the lowliness ascribed to people in those categories is a human, sinful construct. God knows Mary, and deems her blessed.

Friends, we've been celebrating the beautiful, powerful, mysterious work that God does in the dark this season, motivated in part by the struggles of pandemic, and in part by the challenge posed by numerous authors in our anti-racism work to re-imagine, among other things, the false equivalency of dark equalling bad. As we sprint toward Christmas, I hope that, like Mary of Nazareth and Lucille Bridges, you will recognize that there is something divine growing inside of you, something that God needs you to give birth to, something that will be good news of great joy for God's people. And, whether your inspiration is "Mary Did You Know," or the "Magnificat" or "Push It," or our next hymn which ends with the haunting line, "tell God I say, 'Yes,'" my prayer is that the fact—the FACT—that you are beloved by God will bring you joy. May it be so.

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