

**Grace Episcopal Church
Galena, Illinois
December 16, 2012
3rd Sunday of Advent**

**The Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell
Luke 1: 39-45**

[Note: Today, I exercised some license by replacing the designated Gospel text. Next week will be Lessons and Carols at Grace, so we would have missed this wonderful text of "The Visitation." So instead of a second week of the "voice crying in the wilderness," on this 3rd Sunday of Advent, Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of joy represented by the rose colored candle in the Advent wreath, we heard a story about joy, embodied joy. Of course, following my decision, the terrible tragedy in Newtown Connecticut occurred, so this sermon took on a whole new direction.]

In the past 48 hours, in the wake of yet another horrendous tragedy, we have been bombarded by words: words of stunned disbelief, words of anger and grief; stories, news reports, prayers and tirades.

In the past 48 hours, we have been overwhelmed with images: a line of children being led to safety by teachers; parents waiting in a fire station to learn whether their children were okay. Joy and hugs in some instances. Drooping, shaking shoulders and tears in others.

One image, posted over and over on Facebook these past two days has stayed with me. It is not a new image. It is not related to this particular tragedy.

It as a man, a middle-aged, dark haired man who squats down to a level where he can look directly into the eyes of a small child. The caption goes something like this: when I saw scary things on the news, my mother always said, "Look for the helpers. There are always helpers."

The man was Fred Rogers, the late host of "Mr. Rogers Neighborhood" on PBS. Some made fun of his quiet, calm presence, his gentle demeanor, his cardigan sweater, and his shoe-changing ritual. But as the mother of two sons who watched the program, I know that he provided a safe space, an affirming place where children could confront their fears and uncertainties. Even if the fear was just about going down the drain with the bathwater! And they could know they were okay.

He was a man who reflected on his mother's wisdom that stayed with him and informed his work. Wisdom that he passed along to others.

That image, that caption cannot save those 20 children, those adults gunned down in cold blood. They cannot relieve the immediate suffering of those families. Or prevent the nightmares of those who lived through the horror. But surely, at some level, this safe space could provide solace and comfort, assurance.

I wonder if that was what Mary was looking for when she traveled to the home of her cousin Elizabeth.

This is the story of two women – not yet mothers, but soon to be. Two women – one very young, one old – at least beyond normal childbearing years. Both found themselves pregnant in amazing circumstances, announced by an angel.

Both are to bear sons with special and difficult callings who will die by unspeakable violence.

Think about these women for a moment. Elizabeth: the daughter of a priest, the wife of a priest, accustomed to scorn and ridicule because she had been unable to do what women were meant to do. She had been unable to bear children. And now, at this age, she was pregnant – with a husband struck dumb because he doubted the angel’s message! I’m betting they were the talk of the town. It’s no wonder Elizabeth kept herself in seclusion.

Then there was Mary – a poor, unwed teen, pregnant-- but not by her betrothed. This would have been far more scandalous in those days than in our time. Joseph was within his rights to cast her aside, in which case she would have been charged with an act of adultery, punishable by stoning.

Yes, we are told Mary didn’t blink an eye when Gabriel told her the news that she would bear this child. There was no hesitation before she responded, “Let it be to me according to your word.” And yet, and yet, did she think of these things later? Did she worry?

A time apart, away from home, might have been just the thing she needed, a visit with a female relative also experiencing an extraordinary pregnancy. Together they could be astonished, perplexed, and, perhaps, scared to death of what was happening to them. Together they could share their incredible situations and affirm and encourage one another.

That affirmation certainly came for Mary as Elizabeth’s baby leapt with joy inside her womb. And Elizabeth made what might be the very first Christian confession of faith, calling Mary “the mother of my Lord.” Their two individual stories merged into one stream assuring both that it was indeed God working within them!

Before the events of Friday, I had intended to go in the direction of the flutters of something new that each of us feels within us from time to time. The flutters we aren’t sure are real or valid. That need affirmation. That need one another.

But now, I go to another side of this coin. To the fears, the sadness – maybe even to the

personal tragedies that need a tender touch, a safe space whether that be an Elizabeth or a Fred Rogers passing on a mother's love and wisdom. We need one another in these times, too.

For you see, God has promised us that no matter how dark the night, the light has come into the world. And the darkness shall not overcome the light. We must remind each other of this promise.

Look for the helpers. There are always helpers. And the light of Christ shines through them.

Amen.