When I was in Senegal, our host was Therese, she's Catholic. A few months before we'd arrived one of her sons was killed in a car accident. During the first weeks of our time there I was in her room one afternoon and as she talked about her son, she gestured, pointing to her altar, and spoke of the Virgin. In her time of intense grief, her prayers to the Virgin Mary supported and sustained her. Therese's faith in God was tangible and her relationship with the Virgin undeniable. I remember wondering about that relationship, realizing how absent it was in my own faith and Anabaptist upbringing.

Near the end of our time in West Africa, Therese invited me to join her on a pilgrimage. A group of retired persons from the parish were planning to go by bus to a nearby coastal town where the Virgin had been seen some years ago. I'd heard of this place and knew about Holy Week pilgrimages. Of course I wanted to go, knowing it would be a new experience and one I wouldn't likely have another opportunity for. While there is much that could be said about that day, and it was a good day, the image that is most vivid in my memory is the one of a circle of shrines, covered with layers and layers of wax from burned candles, physical remainders and reminders of countless prayers to the Virgin. This was something completely new. And it wasn't about being-in-Africa-new. Nor new because it was a different religion. These altars were constructed by Christians. It was a sacred place, and I wasn't interested being a spectator. So when Therese went to one altar to pray, I went to another. Once there I wasn't sure what to do. How do I pray to Mary? Do I want to pray to her? Should I pray her? What does it mean to do so? As you can tell, not much praying going on! At some point the questions quieted, replaced with a sense that praying to Mary could be a kind of praying to Mother God. Praying, "Mother God" in that Holy place,

at that altar where thousands of others have prayed was a holy and deeply moving experience.

We as Protestants, certainly we Mennonites, don't make a lot of fuss about Mary. And we as middle class, educated Protestants make *no* fuss about the Virgin. Now, I won't propose conversion to Catholicism this morning! But given our Texts, spending time with Mary, looking at her, contemplating, and listening to her seems appropriate. Let's turn to Luke.

The first people Luke introduces us to in his Gospel are Elizabeth and Zechariah. They're priests and Luke describes them both as "righteous before God." They're both old. And they're childless: Elizabeth is barren. As we know, Zechariah is visited by a messenger of God who tells him his wife is going to have a child. This is a familiar story; it reminds us of Abraham and Sarah—another righteous couple, old, childless, barren. They too were visited by an angel who announced offspring. Like Sarah, Elizabeth is now too old to have children. But the angel of God assures Zechariah that even before birth, this fruit of Elizabeth's sterile womb will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He'll be a prophet, like Elijah, turning peoples' hearts to God. Just as Abraham protested the announcement, so Zechariah protests, sure they are too old. But the messenger doesn't waiver, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news."

Just as God created in the beginning God, bringing new life into emptiness and nothingness, once again God is acting, bringing new life. God is creating new life, not in an expected fertile place, but in a most unexpected, unlikely, and impossible place. So while Zechariah is secluded in speechlessness, Elizabeth is secluded in pregnancy and expectation,

her body swelling, her womb filling with God's promise. She has *not* lost her speech, claiming, "This is what God has done for me when God looked favorably on me." She may well have been reading Psalm 80, claiming the fulfillment of her earlier prayers, "Restore us O God of hosts; let Your face shine, that we may be saved." She had indeed been restored; God's face has indeed shined on her; and she is, again, saved.

When Elizabeth is six months pregnant, the same Gabriel, the same mighty man of God is sent to Galilee to the town of Nazareth. God has sent Gabriel with another birth announcement, this time to Mary, a young woman engaged to Joseph. The first birth announcement was to a woman too old to have a child, a woman whose womb was sterile; this time the announcement comes to a woman too young, a woman whose womb is virgin. Gabriel comes to Mary, "Greetings, favored one!" "Don't be afraid; you've found grace with God." Gabriel continues, his news more and more amazing with each word, "You'll conceive. You'll name him Jesus, Savior. He'll be great. Son of the Most High. He'll reign eternally in a kingdom without end." A fantastic, unbelievable announcement. And Mary answers as we might expect, "How can this be? I've not known a man?"

But once again, and always, God is not dependent on human action or inaction. Gabriel is bringing God's Word, speaking God's Word. God is about to create, independent of human circumstances. Independent of science and biology. We tend to get caught up in the biological impossibility of Mary's pregnancy, completely missing that this isn't about Mary's virginity—or any other human definitions and limitations—but about the power of God to create and bring life into the most unlikely places, even into impossible places and spaces. This Jesus who will be born from Mary's womb is *God's* creation, not Joseph's.

In response to Mary's question, "How can this be?" Gabriel assures her that the Holy Spirit and the "power of the Most High" will be present with her. And he also tells her about Elizabeth's pregnancy, ending with, "nothing will be impossible with God." You'd think Mary would protest, as Zechariah and Abraham had. Surely she would offer excuses, even names of other women more worthy. But this is not the timid, meek, objecting Mary we imagine and have turned her into. In the face of this gift Gabriel is giving her from God, Mary says, "Okay. Here I am, your servant." She gives herself without reservation. She accepts this gift of grace, not because she deserves it or has earned it, but as a gift freely given from God. This ordinary young woman opens herself to receive this extraordinary gift. Her faith sustains her as she empties herself—of protests, of expectations, of unworthiness—she empties herself in order to make space, in order to be filled with God's promise.

The angel leaves and the Virgin Mary, the now-pregnant Mary gets up and rushes off to see Elizabeth. Elizabeth recognizes her immediately, not because they're cousins but because the new life growing in her womb recognizes Mary! And Elizabeth responds to Mary's arrival in a noisy, ecstatic greeting, "Blessed *euvloge,w* are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb." And blessed *maka,rioj* for believing there will be fulfillment of God's Word spoken to you.

Now, if Luke would have stopped here, we would have enough to know that God is about to do something quite out of the ordinary. Here are two women filled with the Holy Spirit, two women waiting to give birth. There are no men around. "How can this be?" In Matthew's Gospel the angel comes to Joseph and sages from the East come bearing gifts after Jesus is born. But not so in Luke's Gospel. In Luke's Gospel, Gabriel comes to Mary,

Joseph only named as her fiancé, and shepherds and animals will visit the newborn in a stable. Luke's version of this story "lift[s] up the lowly." In his time in history, women, even wives, didn't have power or position. Yet here are Elizabeth and Mary, one woman too old and the other too young, prophets of God. In the Hebrew Bible, prophets—known to be filled with the Holy Spirit—spoke the Word of God to the people. Elizabeth and Mary, filled with the Holy Spirit, aren't speaking the Word of God, they're *enfleshing* the Word of God. "How can this be?"

Mary's body, filled with the Holy Spirit, is filling with God's Word. As her womb fills and her belly swells, Mary gives voice to what is happening within her and around her, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for [God] has looked with favor on the lowliness of His servant...the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is [God's] name... [God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Mary composes her song with words from Scripture, a song that surely reminded early Gospel readers of Hannah's song, recorded in 1 Samuel 2, "My heart exults in the Eternal; my strength is exalted in my God... Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The Eternal makes poor and makes rich; He brings low, [and] also exalts. [God] raises up the poor from the dust; [and] lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor."

Mary knows Scripture. She sings her praise to God with themes and lines and images from Scripture, well-versed in God's Word. This young woman has been dwelling in God's Word, and now God's Word is being made flesh in her body, growing new life in her virgin womb. And surely Mary identifies with Hannah, the barren wife who prayed earnestly for a

child, promising that if God breathed new life into her she would give her child to God's service. Hannah was scorned by her husband's second wife, and ridiculed by the priest who saw her praying and assumed she was drunk. Surely Mary knew she too would be scorned, ridiculed, and misunderstood in the coming months and years. She now understood the faith and strength of Hannah, her faith in God that made it possible to bear a son and after weaning him, take him to the temple and leave him there. Mary knew that just as Hannah had given her son, so she would give her son. Mary knew that all life is a gift from God, a gift to receive but not possess; a gift to receive and a gift to release.

I'm not prepared to set up a shrine to the Virgin Mary, but this Advent season I do have a new appreciation for her. Mary is more than a virgin. Mary's virginity is so much more than biology or sex. Mary *is* the mother of Jesus; Mary *is* the mother of God's son. But God didn't just choose and use Mary for her womb. No, God chose Mary because she was created in the image of God. And Mary's flesh gave life and being to this child of God; Mary's body and blood and being gave flesh to God's Word. Mary may have been a young woman, but she possessed a faith and wisdom beyond her years. Her physicality and spirituality nourished and nurtured the new and growing life inside her. Mary's willingness to receive God's gift of grace, of new life, of eternal life, put her into a partnership with God. She joined God's work of creating and giving new life. God didn't *need* Mary to create this new life, this divine, human child. No, in God's free will God *chose* Mary. God *chose* partnership, relationship. And Mary gave herself, joining in the Mystery of the Incarnation.

God continues to choose to be in relationship with us, to partner with us. We look to Mary, and Elizabeth, two women of faith who show us *how* to receive God's gift. Mary understood perfectly that God was working with her and through her, that it was God at

work, and hers to receive and participate and release into the world. The invitation for us these last few days of Advent, the final days of waiting for the Mystery of the Incarnation to be revealed, is to open ourselves to receive.

In Mary and Elizabeth we see and hear and know that God *is* bringing new life, new breath, new being into *all* places, into the very places that we think are too old, too young, too barren, too virgin. The spaces too dead, too closed, too dry. The open places, the bursting-with-life, fertile places. Into the barren places of our lives, the spaces we think even God can no longer make a difference, the places where it is too late, too difficult, too dry...there...God is there, breathing the Holy Spirit into those void and lifeless spaces. And in the virgin spaces of our lives and beings, the places that haven't yet been touched, the ready and thriving places... there...God is there, breathing the Holy Spirit into those fertile, virgin spaces.

We may never choose to pray *to* the Virgin Mary, but she is surely someone for us to contemplate and look to as teacher—to learn to pray as she prayed, to receive as she received, to accept God's grace and favor as she accepted, to wait as she waited, to be emptied and filled as she was emptied and filled. God's Spirit is breathing in all places and in all times, waiting to create, to breathe new life, waiting to be made flesh. May *we* receive God's grace. May we empty ourselves to be filled with Spirit's breath, letting God create new life in us, giving flesh to God's Word. May a child of hope be born in us.