

In the name of the one who was and who is and who will come again.

My father is notorious for carrying a lot (too much, my mother would say). In fact, my mom refers to this carrying too much as “pulling a Neil” or when I do it, she calls me “little Neil.” Especially when bringing home groceries, my dad prefers to take one trip rather than many from the parking lot into their apartment. He’ll overload his arms and his hands with as many bags as possible, with the gallon of milk dangling from his thumb, the plastic bags cutting off circulation to his fingers, and the loaf of bread being smashed somewhere inside the mass of bags.

Now, my dad is pretty good at handling a large amount of groceries or other shopping items during holiday seasons, but once in awhile, this “pulling a Neil,” carrying everything by himself, in one trip, has been known to backfire. I can remember a time or two when the milk slid out of his grasp onto the hallway carpet just outside the apartment. And even after some serious clean-up and Lysol and Febreze, the hallway still had a bit of a smell for awhile afterward. Yes, carrying more than we can handle, all by ourselves, might not work out for the best.

In Tim O’Brien’s short story, “The Things They Carried,” part of the larger book with the same title, O’Brien describes the things that the soldiers carried with them into and during the Vietnam War. They carried necessities: guns, maps, lined ponchos, rations depending on one’s eating habits, pocket knives.

They carried letters from home and photographs, good luck charms and chess sets. They carried stationary and drugs, and a whole lot more of tangible items as O’Brien lists them. But these young men also carried around things that could not be touched at all: diseases, shame, fear, “all the emotional baggage of men who might die.”¹ Sometimes the tangible things we carry are pounds lighter than anything we could ever hold onto.

Today is a transition day in our Advent celebration. We still have a good four days left until Christmas really begins according to liturgical time. We light the fourth candle on our Advent wreath, we sing Advent hymns, and we listen to lessons of preparation. Still, our gospel gives us a glimpse into the event of Christmas. We’re not quite to the manger yet, but we are getting closer. And so this morning we hear of Mary, the mother of the one for whom we wait.

In the gospel reading, Mary is visiting Elizabeth, her pregnant and much older relative. And with little doubt, we can assume that both these women are carrying around a lot with them as they meet. Elizabeth is over six months pregnant. Her husband Zechariah has been silenced. Mary, the unwed teenager, has just been told by the angel Gabriel that she will conceive by the Holy Spirit and give birth to a king whose kingdom will never end.

Pregnancies, a silent husband, a not-yet husband, angel visitations, and the coming king of the line of David...these women were carrying a lot around with them.

Part of the richness of this gospel text lies in this relationship between Elizabeth and Mary. Because Elizabeth knows, really knows, what it is to be carrying a child. She knows:

- the aches and the pains,
- the walk turned waddle,
- the tears and the laughter,
- the swollen ankles and
- the hopefulness, the breath-taking expectancy of what is to come.

¹ Tim O’Brien. “The Things They Carried.” *The Things They Carried*. New York, Broadway Books, 1990, page 21.

Yes, Elizabeth knows what this is like for Mary. While Elizabeth is much older and Mary is the virgin, they both are carrying around hopefulness, expectancy of children to come. This is the Advent life, the waiting, the hoping, the expectant vision that Christ will come again.

Christ who was born to Mary will return. Christ who died on the cross as redeemer will return. Christ who rose from the dead is going come back. We live with this Advent-expectant hope that Christ's return will bring a new creation with it.

In both Luke's gospel and its sequel, the book of Acts, often the appearance of the Holy Spirit results in a speech of sorts.

- After Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, she exclaims with a loud cry (Luke 1:41).
- After Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit, he speaks a prophecy (Luke 1:67).
- After all are filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they speak in other tongues (Acts 2:4).
- After Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit, he speaks (Acts 4:8).²

And the list goes on. Mary, being filled with the Holy Spirit in a most unique manner, delivers a speech of her own. We call it the Magnificat. And it too speaks of this new creation for which we hope as Advent-people. Mary witnesses to God who looks with favor upon the lowly and is merciful, God who is strong and generous, God who keeps God's promises.

God is good, we might paraphrase for Mary; God does great things.

Just as Mary once long ago carried and bore the Word made flesh in Jesus, we too are called to carry this good news around, to share God's most holy Word, Jesus. We too, filled with the Holy Spirit, can speak out about God's action in our lives.

My soul magnifies my Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. I have a home. I have someone who loves me. I have a walker or a cane or crutches to help me get around. I have a mouth to smile, a hand to write, an ear to listen. I am forgiven, for the Mighty One has done great things for me.

At baptism, we are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. Just as God chose Mary, a common and ordinary person, God has also chosen you and me, common and ordinary people to carry around God's Word. It's the most important thing we carry.

In baptism God calls us God's children and chooses us. The Mighty One has done great things. God calls us God's own. Just as Mary and Elizabeth found companionship and understanding in one another, we can find the same within the body of Christ.

With Advent hope, in Christ who will come, we don't carry everything by ourselves.

As baptized children of God, we don't have to carry it all. We carry around God's Word. We share the good news of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. This is plenty to carry in itself. And we have our brothers and our sisters in Christ to help us with the load.

We can be the Elizabeths and the Marys who walk together in joy, in expectancy, in hopefulness, waiting for great things to come and giving thanks for what we already have known. And so we echo Mary: The Mighty One has indeed done great things and will continue doing so among us and through us.

To the glory of God.

² Brian Stoffregen at www.crossmarks.com.