

I've been thinking this week of Ray Stewart, who passed away on January 20, 2005, nearly three years ago, but who I think about nearly every day. **Ray was a blink away from turning 90 when he died, so we weren't close in age, but very near in spirit, and I miss him a great deal.** Like me, he had a talent for upsetting Quakers of a certain stripe—the same people were always mad at both of us—and Ray could always be counted upon for advice and support. **I would phone him to lament some difficulty I was having, and a half hour later he would be at our back door, saying, "Philip, my boy, let's talk."**

It's comforting to have someone you can confide in when the road of life turns to gravel and potholes. We assume it will be our parents, and that's nice when it happens, but it doesn't always. **Maybe our parents are deceased or live in Florida or there is too much baggage there and being vulnerable to them is difficult.** But it is good to have someone we can turn to, and it is especially nice when that person is older, has seen everything at least once, and isn't easily upset. *A Been there. Done that. Got the t-shirt.* kind of person.

So young Mary has been visited by the angel Gabriel and has been told the Holy Spirit will overshadow her and she will bear a special child, the Son of God. **Naturally, she is taken aback.** I imagine her response in the original Aramaic translates to read, "You've got to be kidding!"

She needs to talk to someone. Now. She doesn't go to her parents. We don't know why, though we can guess. **If you're a young, unmarried girl and have to explain to your father that you're pregnant and the father was the Holy Spirit, you sense that explanation might not fly.** So Mary goes instead to a trusted, older relative—Elizabeth. We're not sure how they're related. Luke simply describes them as "kinsfolk." **We do know Elizabeth was at the tail end of her life, that Mary's life was really just beginning, and we know Mary must have trusted Elizabeth.** The reader knows something Mary and Elizabeth don't yet know—both households have been visited by the angel Gabriel and have been told they would have children under special circumstances, though neither one knows that about the other.

Elizabeth's first words when she saw Mary, are so stylized, so much like an early prayer, we must be suspicious. **"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!"** More likely, Elizabeth looked at pregnant Mary and said something like, "What were you thinking?"

Mary might have said, "It's not what you think. The Holy Spirit is the father. An angel appeared to me, told me I was going to have a baby, and here I am."

**"Oh, I'd believe that," Elizabeth might have said. "Six months ago, I wouldn't have believed it, but I believe it now."**

You live long enough, you see everything.

**So here they are, two women, one at the end of her story, the other still writing her foreword.** Drawn together by their common experience, their affection for one another, and their usefulness to each other. **Mary needs Elizabeth's wisdom and counsel.** Can you imagine being unmarried and pregnant in a society where they kill people for that? **Elizabeth needs Mary's youth and energy.** Can you imagine being on Social Security and finding out you're pregnant? You're going to need help. **So they are drawn together, Mary and Elizabeth, for protection and counsel and comfort.**

I want to make an observation about this story that isn't spelled out. It's implied, and important. **If you want to feel hopeful, don't go someone for advice who is pessimistic or gloomy.** Think about it. If you're confused and worried and upset, what's the last thing you want? The last thing you want is to be around someone who says you have every reason to be confused, worried, and upset.

Just the opposite, you want to be around people who are confident and optimistic, who can say, "I knew someone else this happened to, and everything turned out OK for them, and it'll be OK for you, too." **You don't want to go to someone who'll tell you how much worse it's going to get.** Mary is in a tough situation, so she goes to the most optimistic person she knows—Elizabeth.

I was visiting a man in the hospital a few months ago. **A hospital volunteer chaplain was there, ostensibly to cheer people up, and she asked my friend what was wrong with him.** He said, "I have leukemia." She said, "Oh, leukemia, that's terrible. Everyone I know who's had leukemia ended up dead." **Now, if you had leukemia, would you want to spend the day with that woman?** Of course not.

So I suspect Mary went to Elizabeth, because Elizabeth had the gift of optimism, had the ability to look at difficult situations and say, "We're gonna make it. I know you're worried, but everything will be fine." **You know, sometimes we need people who'll tell us that, even when things won't be fine.** Or who will remind us that the ultimate outcome of a situation might not be what we'd hoped or dreamed, but that ultimately all will be well, that God is with us, and all will be well. Maybe not tomorrow. **Maybe it will still be hard tomorrow.** But ultimately, all will be well.

So I picture Elizabeth saying to Mary, "People are going to talk about you behind your back. They'll say bad things about you. Some people won't speak to you any longer. They're going to judge you. No matter how wonderful your child is, no matter how deeply Joseph loves you, there'll be some people who'll always look down at you. But don't you worry about that. You'll be fine."

If, as you age, you're getting more and more pessimistic, more and more likely to see the dark and not the light, you might remember all the things in your life that turned out better than you'd first thought: The bills you didn't think you could pay, got paid. The child you worried and fretted about, grew up and became a kind, decent, capable person. The marriage you thought was over, wasn't. The divorce you thought would crush you, didn't. **So Elizabeth, from the perspective of her long, long life, gave Mary a beautiful gift—optimism.** "You'll be fine. Your child will be fine. All will be well. God is with you."

Christmas reminds us that to be a Christian is to be an optimist, is to have, always burning in our hearts, the flame of hope. **Sometimes it flickers, sometimes the winds of life nearly blow it out, but still it shines.** "The light shineth in darkness and the darkness hath not overcome it." (John 1:5)

So we are people of hope. We are optimists. We believe the most audacious things. **We believe God is at work in every life.** Not everyone believes that, but we do.

**We believe no situation is so hard and difficult and painful that something good can't come from it.**

We believe we can build a new meetinghouse and create a vital center for Quakerism, so that a hundred years from now this area is filled with people living out the Quaker values of peace, justice, equality, and compassion. There are now 83 Quaker schools in America, educating the future leaders of the world. **Could the 84<sup>th</sup> one be started in our new meetinghouse?** Why not! I believe this rebirth of Quakerism will be so vivid, appealing and powerful, that when our descendants wonder how it happened, they will conclude it started when 150 Quakers at Fairfield Meeting were filled with such hope and trust and faith, that God had no choice but to do something wonderful through them.

**And to you who doubt that a gathering of 150 Quakers is too small, consider what God did with one child, born to a peasant girl, scared out of her wits, looking for one kind voice to say, "All will be well."**