

Yesterday, Gladys Johnson turned ninety years old.

The day before, Lily Weaver turned eight.

Last Sunday, Lily came running up to Gladys to wish her a happy birthday, and Gladys, knowing it would soon be Lily's birthday too, welcomed her with joy and returned the favor.

It was one of those sacred moments that makes Resurrection so special, the beautiful old woman talking and smiling and embracing with the beautiful little girl, God's faithful mercy from generation to generation on bright display before our watching eyes.

Imagine how happy they would have been if they were both pregnant!

Lily and Gladys looked for all the world like Mary and Elizabeth, one much too young to be having her first child, the other much too old.

One has spent her life answering questions about why she never had children, innocent questions asked by gentle, well-meaning people that still leave a scar across a silent heart, while the other can only dread the questions and the snickers and the stares that are coming.

One's pregnancy will mark the end of decades of social stigma; the other's marks the onset of a stigma that will never go away.

Both have reason to fear for their life.

Pregnancy is hard enough under normal circumstances; it could be fatal for a woman who struggles to walk or for a girl on the run.

Our gospel scene is fraught with peril and pain.

Mary goes to Elizabeth, a distant relative, on a tip from an angel, whom she has reason to trust more than her parents or immediate family.

Elizabeth sees Mary at the door and there is a lightning bolt of pain in her gut; it's either the violent movement of the baby in her womb or the instant realization of poor young Mary's desperate plight...it's probably both.

Either way, it's hell on an old body that suffers aches and pains just from waking up.

In a moment so horrible and hopeless, Elizabeth does something unfathomable.

She smiles.

She blesses the pregnant little girl and praises her.

Full of excruciating pain and wisdom and worry and the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth welcomes her with open arms and holy wonder as the mother of her Lord.

This scene is too absurd and awful and impossible to be anything but sacred.

Only God can be thanked for a mess this deep, this disastrous, this wonderful.

The God that Elizabeth recognizes and Mary celebrates is the God of the prophet Micah, who looks at an equally horrible situation and sings of wild, unexpected hope.

In one short and haunting verse, Micah describes the plight of a people:

*Now you are walled around with a wall, siege is laid against us;  
with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel upon the cheek.*

Our generation is not the first to see Jerusalem surrounded and choked by a stifling wall.

Micah's generation saw the city besieged by the brutal Assyrians, whose soldiers were known to march from town to town with the fresh, still bleeding heads of conquered neighbors dripping from the top of their spears.

Now they have captured the capital and are slapping the king around.

Israel is as certainly doomed as pregnant little Mary is.  
And Micah, like Mary, smiles and begins to sing.

Micah's song is steeped, like Mary's, in memory and promise.

Enveloped by imperial warmongering, Micah sings of the international greatness of a man of peace, the glory of a kind shepherd on his way from the little town of Bethlehem. Like Mary, Micah remembers.

Little Bethlehem is big in Israel's history because it is Bethlehem of Ephrathah, which is the family name of the clan of Elimelech and Naomi.

Elimelech died and so did his sons, leaving Naomi a brokenhearted widow with no one to care for her--no one, that is, except her foreign daughter-in-law who refused to leave her.

Their story, the story of an unlikely friendship between an old woman and a young woman in hopeless circumstances, is spun in the biblical book named after that tenacious young woman, the book of Ruth.

Ruth followed Naomi to Israel and married a Jewish man who would have been scorned by Ezra and Nehemiah and the purists, those champions of God's law and defenders of Israelite identity who preached so vehemently against the immorality of intermarriage.

Through this scandalous coupling, Ruth becomes the mother of Obed, who was the grandfather of the great shepherd from Bethlehem, King David himself.

In the bloody center of great Jerusalem's war, Micah sings of little Bethlehem producing peace; in the center of unspeakable ruthlessness, Micah sings of Ruth.

Such insane and indefensible hope can only come from a God who is willing and able to color outside the lines, to cross borders and brick walls that no one else has the courage or strength or imagination to cross.

God crosses the impenetrable line between Jew and Gentile to seed Israel's greatest king.

God crosses the thresholds of two tightly closed wombs, one too old, the other too young, to bring to birth salvation and joy.

God crosses the lines between the generations to bring together Mary and Elizabeth in the same wild household and Gladys and Lily in the same family of faith.

God crosses the lines of propriety and expectation, blows past the borders of age and socio-economic status and ethnicity, and through that miracle growing inside of Mary will blast through the wall between death and life.

As Robert Jensen has written, whenever you draw a line, Jesus is on the other side of it, and he will be until we finally realize and accept that salvation has nothing to do with our sharpened pencils and everything to do with God's eraser.

God will not be stopped by any of the limits we negotiate, construct, defend or assume.

Neither sealed womb nor sealed tomb will hold God in or keep God out.

Which is why, when things get impossible, God's prophets like Mary and Micah smile and sing.

This Thursday night will be the ninety-fifth anniversary of the arrival of the one Micah promised.

He was born on a battlefield in Europe.

German soldiers began to sing Christmas carols and to decorate trees with candles.

Their French and British enemies did not recognize the language but they knew the song. When the German soldiers began to sing *Stille Nacht*, the English sang *Silent Night* with them.

Guns were laid down and gifts were exchanged; soldiers became soccer players, and the orders of commanding officers to keep firing were drowned by the unyielding music of peace.

A line was crossed, and Christ was born again.

It is bleak out there.

War continues to suffocate a world hemorrhaging from greed and good intentions, bleeding from our Molotov cocktail of unchecked market lusts and misguided religions.

The economy teeters and stumbles like a midnight drunk while purists and politicians continue to argue over where to draw more and more lines that God will refuse to honor.

Jobs and health and reputations and our entire environment hang in peril like the king in the enemy's hateful hands or a pregnant teenager in the reach of religious idealists.

Our human community is fragmented like broken bread as fear and prejudice and violence and a culture intoxicated with individualism relentlessly rip us apart.

And in the midst of all this hopeless madness, Gladys, full of the Holy Spirit, smiles and opens her arms to embrace Lily.

It is time for us to sing.