**New Year Hope**

A man said to me three days before Christmas, “I can’t believe you Christians. You all believe in a carpenter from Nazareth. To me it’s all ‘gobbly gook.’” I didn’t have a quick response. Perhaps I was a little stunned. After all, I had only said hello to the man. Thinking about it later, I wish I was better prepared. I could have said, “Do you at least have hope?”

God can work with hope. It’s not faith, but it’s moving in the right direction. This man, for example, has a lovely wife and has been married for many years. It’s likely that he could be hopeful that there is something beyond death, if not for him, then at least for his wife.

Two remarkable women, one a teenage mother and the other a woman on the outside of her childbearing years, saw hope in their children who were yet to be born. The Virgin Mary and Elizabeth also faced tremendous challenges. They were both living in a patriarchal Jewish society that pushed women into the background. They were victims of the chaos and confusion brought on by the conquering Roman army and, yet, they were both filled with hope.

The origin of all this hope is, of course, the Holy Spirit. The same Holy Spirit that hovered over the waters in the Genesis story was hovering over the wombs of Mary and her cousin, Elizabeth. Such hope often springs into song. The angels sang at Jesus’ birth. Zechariah sang when his speech returned and he named his son, John. Simeon sang his prophesy that Jesus was to bring about the rise and fall of many and that a sword would pierce Mary’s heart. Mary sang her song of triumph in the Magnificat: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant. From this day all ages will call me blessed: the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name” (Lk 1:46-49).

This New Year is a time of hope. I say this with full knowledge of the difficulties of this present time. There are companies closing and prices rising. Friends and family members are moving far from home and fiscal cliffs (whatever they are) are looming. The world is still grieving the deaths of innocent students and teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut. There is still a war seething in Syria and Afghanistan as well as fighting in our own city streets and homes.

Can a person be hopeful in the midst of such uncertainty and violence? Yes, because hope is more than a feeling. I hope because of Jesus. I hope because I know that the Lord is with those grieving families in Connecticut. I hope because wars, natural disasters, financial insecurity, illness, crime, human excess and selfishness will never stamp out the face of Christ or the Spirit of God hovering over our world. Our God is with us and that will never change.

I do hope for better days. I hope for peace and for peacemakers. I hope for unity among Christians and understanding and respect between all the peoples of the world. I hope because a carpenter from Nazareth changed the world. I’m humbled to be part of his story.

This song of hope needs to be passed on. Fifteen thousand children were asked in a survey: “What do you think makes a family happy?” They did not list big houses or fancy cars or new computers. The vast majority of children responded: “Doing things together.” When we do things together, like go to church or volunteer for community service or visit the elderly, the song of hope is heard more clearly. Our children need an anchor. They need hope.

Mary and Elizabeth understood. They passed on this hope to their children. John the Baptist grew up and pointed to the fulfillment of hope in Jesus. Jesus reveals to the world that hope leads to faith and faith is a relationship that leads to joy, the joy that Jesus says, “no one can take from you” (Jn 16:22b).

Our Mother Mary knew of this joy, despite her difficult life. When she was a teenager she proclaimed: “God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty … He has remembered his promise of mercy, the promise he made to our fathers, to Abraham and his children forever” (Lk 1:53-55). When she was an adult she gave the directive to the servants at the wedding in Cana: “Do whatever he (Jesus) tell you.” What marvelous advice. When we do what Jesus tells us, our hope is fulfilled.

Now, we just have to pass it on.

(Originally published in the Catholic Chronicle of St. Lucia)