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Zephaniah 3:14-20, Isaiah 2:2-6, Luke 1:26-38
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I love these beautiful words from Zephaniah, a little bit obscure, late 7th century, Assyria imploding, Babylon rising... To weary, fearful people, the prophet Zephaniah says *Let not your hands grow weak*. I've thought about hands all week. My hands, they feel a little weary, more due to a little early onset arthritis than any hard work. I think of laborers, and those under stress. George Buttrick spoke of prayer as beating on heaven's door "with bruised knuckles in the dark." *Let not your hands grow weak*. Keep working, keep praying. The promise in Zephaniah? *For the Lord your God will rejoice over you with gladness, he will exult over you with loud singing. At that time I will bring you home.* Wow.

Were Mary's hands weary? Like every girl, or every very young woman, she drew water from the well, pulling a coarse rope, hoisting a heavy bucket. Her hands probably were crusty, wiry strong; she labored, and she prayed. When her hands grew weary, did she think of the phrase from Zephaniah she would have known, despite being – most likely – illiterate? *Let not your hands grow weak*.

She was, or at least we have loved to imagine that she was, at a well when it happened – you know, the angel Gabriel telling her about the baby – or just as it was about to happen. Before the angel came, when she was drawing water (*if she was drawing water!*), did she think of the verse we heard from Isaiah 12? *With joy you will draw water from the well of salvation*. Securing water was hard work, verging on drudgery. I've seen women in Haiti, very poor women, drawing scarce, precious water into a bucket, and I am unsure how they muster the strength. But I have seen them balance the water on their heads for the long walk home – and smile. *With joy you will draw water from the well of salvation*. It's just a well of water, but salvation must have seemed as precious as water. Isaiah 55 speaks of salvation: "Come to the water, and draw..." and other prophecies speak of water springing forth where there is no water.

Was Mary there, 30 years later, when Jesus said "I am the living water"? Was she there when he stood by the Pool of Siloam, filled by the Spring Gihon, and healed, and taught? She certainly was there when they pierced him in his side, and not only blood but also water poured out. Didn't she witness quite a few baptisms in the early years of the Church? And did she then recall with joy tinged with sorrow that night decades before when her water broke, and the birth pangs intensified?

What did Mary think, feel, hear, sense at that well, before she was Mary, the Mary of glorious renown, the Mary who was still just a young, teenage girl, a nobody really, with the arduous task of drawing water, her hands barely strong enough to hoist the bucket up? Did she think of Isaiah, *With joy you will draw water from the well of salvation*? and Zephaniah, *Let not your hands grow weak*? Did she hear something besides her own memory and ruminations? What would an angel sound like, anyway? Or was it just the breeze rippling over the water, echoing through the cavernous well?

She folds her hands, notices they are callused, almost too tired to hold anything at all. She opens her palms – and senses them being washed, refreshed somehow mysteriously by some unasked for goodness from...well, **it can only be from God, right?** She lifts her hands and ... **could it really be happening?** She hears faintly, but surely, music, a voice, voices, a carol of praise, a plaintive tune... **but what are the words? *Ye who are weary come home? Please come home for Christmas?*** Her mind raced to the great festive holidays of her childhood – and she could have sworn she could hear a carnival, like the one she recalled from the streets of Jerusalem, **with shouts of joy, exultation, energetic dancing, the thrill of timbrel, giggles and laughter, and music**, like a great symphony, unheard of, massive... but **perhaps it is just a small child singing.**

She turns her head. **The streets are empty.** What does she hear? Might it, even possibly, be that a hole has been punctured, briefly, in the canopy of heaven, and she has heard angelic voices, perhaps even the voice of God? It was there in Zephaniah, just a couple of verses from ***Let not your hands grow weak.*** What did Zephaniah say? **The Lord your God will rejoice over you with gladness; he will exult over you with loud singing, as on a day of festival. I wonder,** she thinks, believing now she truly has heard God and the heavenly hosts in celebration of song, over whom the Lord was exulting? **No one is here; nothing has happened, at least as far as I know.**

But then, for the first time, she felt it. A vague stirring, a slight hint of nausea, but yet she wasn't sick at all. In fact, **I've never felt happier**, although she couldn't fathom why. But one thing she knows. It is time to go home. That was in Zephaniah, too: God's promise to gather us together, **to bring us home. I don't know if anyone else is coming home, but I do know I am going, now, and I might even share with my parents – and perhaps even with Joseph when I see him next – what I at least thought I heard this morning.** And she was on her feet, and off, with a bit of a skip, almost a gallop. And then she remembered: **the water!** And she went back, lifted the container, situated it on her head, and headed down the road, the load feeling a bit lighter than usual.