

The Invitation

by Jane Rowland

***“Come to me all you who labor and are
burdened, and I will give you rest”
Matthew 11:28***

The Advent season is a time to both remember and prepare; we remember when Jesus first came to be Emmanuel or “God with us,” and we prepare for his return. Our lives unfold here in the middle space, sandwiched between the mystery of what God has done and the promise of what’s to come. So Advent is also a time to consider more deeply the ways that God wants to be with us in that middle space, in the here and now.

There are always parts of ourselves that could be more open to his presence. I once heard someone say that all too often we become familiar with a God we barely know. We think we know Him, we even dare to become a little bored. But God is never boring, even if our ideas about him are. Maybe God has invited you here tonight because he sees a need of your heart and there is some way that He wants to draw closer to you this Advent.

We are just going to try to create some space for Him to do that. There are so many ways that God speaks to us: through Scripture, through nature, through the Sacraments, through one another, through music and art, anywhere there is true beauty or a sense of wonder.

Tonight our goal is to encounter God through some of these doorways. Your role is to pay attention to what stirs you, what piques your interest. What brings tears, joy? What brings peace, or longing? Pay attention to those tugs on your heart which might be the Holy Spirit, saying, “Let’s talk about that.”

I want to share an example from my own experience of how this might look. My doorway to an encounter was a Scripture passage from the Gospel of John: “Mary took a liter of costly perfumed oil made from genuine aromatic nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair; the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.”

Now, normally I would begin my prayer time by closing my eyes and placing myself in the scene and sort of allowing the story to unfold in my imagination. But on this one occasion, the last part of that scripture just kept grabbing my attention. “The house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.” And at first I was really quite irritated because I already had an idea of how this prayer time was supposed to go and this one sentence was such a distraction!

And I started to get frustrated because instead of thinking of this as a conversation, I was thinking about it like a task I was accomplishing, or a performance, and I was judging my success. Eventually it occurred to me that God might have his own agenda for this time. So I let go of my own expectations and I just said, “Ok, fine. Lord, why is this one sentence capturing my attention? What is it that you are trying to tell me?”

And then—the most amazing thing happened—nothing. Nothing at all happened. I'm sitting there in my prayer space waiting for this big inspiration.... Nothing. There's just a sense of peace that accompanies this one sentence and I don't know why.

See, God doesn't always show up when I want or in the way that I want. (And I know many of you know what I'm talking about.) This is another thing I've had to remember: that God is my friend, and just like a friend, sometimes he just wants to sit with me and love me. He doesn't want to have to follow the script I have laid out for him.

So on this occasion, I just put it back in God's hands, trusting that he does know how to speak to my heart and when there is something that he needs me to know, he will tell me in a way I understand.

Over the next few days this sentence would just peacefully roll over me from time to time, "The house was filled with the fragrance of the oil." Until one day, I came upon a reflection on this same Bible story and the author was describing the fragrance of the oil—how powerful it was—and the symbolism of this woman breaking the jar and pouring it out on Jesus, breaking open her heart, essentially, and pouring out her very self to Jesus. And how the Lord wants all of us to open our hearts to him, to pour ourselves out on him. And there it was again, this feeling of rightness, of peace, and also longing.

So I went back to my prayer space with this new mental image of the woman pouring her heart out on Jesus, and I just start to ask God, why does this image move me? Where does this longing come from? And I realized that it was the idea of Jesus wanting me. I felt like he was asking, "Can you, will you pour yourself out on me?" And I thought, "I want to do that, but how? What does that mean in real life? What does that look like?"

At that very moment, there was a knock on the door. My 11-year-old came in and said, "Mom, I'm really sorry to interrupt, but I'm confused by my math homework. Do you think you could help me?" And right away I had this memory of something I read about Mother Teresa, that when she was interrupted in prayer she always just smiled, because she knew she was turning her attention from Jesus...to Jesus.

Now, I'm no "Mother Teresa," and I'm not always a model of patience when I'm interrupted. But in that moment everything just clicked into place, and I understood that God was answering my question—"How does this look in real life?" He was saying, "This is how. I will pour myself out on you, and then you pour your love out onto your family and *your whole house will be filled with the fragrance of the oil.*"

God led me, step by step, in his time, using those tugs on my heart, the people around me and even my own memories to speak to me. And in the end he gave me homework. It was math. My role in all of this was to try to create the space, and then invite him in and pay attention.

So we invite you, throughout this evening, to listen to your own heart and pay attention to what touches you, whether it would be a song, or Scripture verse, an image, or an idea. How is God speaking to you? There may be times during the meditations when you feel moved to close your eyes, and we're not

going to be showing any slides or anything that you're going to miss, so you should feel totally free to close your eyes if it allows you to better enter into the story.

So let's begin by giving God permission to speak to us. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, who created us, who gave us our imaginations, who knows the deepest desires of our hearts, come be with your daughters here tonight. Send your Spirit to set our hearts on fire with your love. We place our agendas, our expectations, and (especially our self-criticisms) into your loving hands. Please guide our thoughts, our feelings, and our mental images as we do our best to be open and follow your lead.

We thank you for inviting us here. Amen.

Reflection Questions: With others at your table, reflect and discuss one or more of the questions below

1. Why did you come here tonight? Do you think God invited you?
2. How do you usually encounter God in your life? At church? In nature? In other people? Do you pray? How?
3. Have you ever thought about your imagination as a gift through which God can communicate to you?
4. Take a minute to look in your program at the list of phrases that can be used to describe God. Which one(s) capture your attention, or evokes the strongest emotion? Why, do you think?

Listed in the program....

- a light in the darkness
- Father God
- a way forward
- a safe haven in the storm
- rest for the weary
- someone with answers
- a drink of living water
- Creator God
- a healer of wounds
- a shepherd, searching
- a friend who loves you for being you
- your Beloved, the Bridegroom
- an adventure
- a superhero
- someone who fights for you, defends you

- someone who treasures you
- problem-solver
- bringer of freedom
- protector
- Spirit of wisdom
- breath of life

Elizabeth's Story

by Jane Rowland

***“And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of
Mary, the child leaped in her womb; and
Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit”
Luke 1:41***

Luke's gospel begins with the story of Zachariah and Elizabeth. The angel Gabriel appears to Zachariah and foretells the birth of John the Baptist. Unfortunately for Zachariah, he can't seem to get past the logistics so he decides to use this opportunity to explain to the angel that Elizabeth is too old. This doesn't go over well, and the angel tells him that he will be unable to speak until the child is born. As for Elizabeth, we aren't told much about her, except that she sees her pregnancy as an answered prayer.

We would miss something, though, if we watered down her story. We might be tempted, for example, to sum it up by saying that Elizabeth was sad because she was childless, and then God answered her prayer (as if that were all there was to it). But life is rarely so tidy, and if we over-simplify either the longings of Elizabeth's heart or God's response to her, then we just end up with two-dimensional storybook characters and we can't connect with them. So let's look more closely at what we do know and ask the Holy Spirit to help fill in the gaps.

Let's try to imagine Elizabeth. Scripture says that she obeyed all the commandments “blamelessly.” So she is a good person; you can count on her to follow through, even when people don't notice. And here Scripture provides an interesting little detail; it says that Elizabeth believes her pregnancy will take away her “reproach” or “disgrace” in the sight of others. So what exactly is going on in this community? Were people making unfair assumptions? Did they pity her? Or ignore her? Were they mean?

It's pretty clear that they are *not* seeing her goodness. Elizabeth is hurting, and now we can begin to recognize her because she could be any of the number of women we know. We are all hurting in some way; we've all been wounded, all too often by one another. And sometimes, by life itself. We start out, many of us, with our hearts aflame, ready to launch into a world that we think is always going to be good and gentle and fair. And then it isn't.

So Elizabeth has been faithful, but life hasn't turned out quite the way she planned...and maybe her prayers are starting to get a little tired, or even anxious. That flame in her heart (we can call it joyful expectation, or longing, or hope)—somewhere along the line that flame has started to flicker. Elizabeth is losing hope.

And then she begins to hear those lies. You know what I'm talking about, that little voice in your head that says, "You don't belong. If people really knew you, they could never love you. You're not enough." And then the final blow, "*It's always going to be this way and there's nothing you can do about it.*"

So Elizabeth, maybe without even realizing it, starts living from this wounded place, believing that this must be *God's* opinion of her. Maybe he is, after all, just tolerating her. Or worse, maybe He doesn't think about her at all.

Pause for a minute and close your eyes and imagine Elizabeth standing before you. It's ok if you can't see a mental picture of her; just feel her presence. Allow yourself to understand her. She is having a moment of doubt, and she's covered her face with her hands. She wants, more than anything, to be seen and loved for who she is (not for what she has or what she does), just for who she is. She wants to know she is not forgotten. She needs hope.

Imagine yourself wrapping your arms around her.

When you begin to see Elizabeth as a woman whose heart is not so different from yours, when you begin to be moved with some compassion towards her, then you actually begin to see her through God's eyes. Has he forgotten her? No, she's His *daughter*. He's proud of her. He has always had a plan for her life. He wants to put His arms around her. He wants to heal her heart.

Elizabeth's prayer has been for a child, and God does answer that prayer, but He doesn't stop there. He knows Elizabeth better than she knows herself. He sees the flame in her heart flickering. He sees her wounds and the way the enemy has sown doubt in her mind and division within her community. He wants to remind Elizabeth that she is part of something bigger, that He is her Father and that she hasn't been forgotten; she's not alone. So...what does God do?

Not too far away from Elizabeth, there is another woman, full of light, fearless and free, fully grounded in her identity as a child of God. This woman's name is Mary, and her heart is on *fire* with God's love; she loves deeply and courageously! She is so open to God that He fills her with his own Divine Life. And she carries that Life, that burning Ember of Love inside her, straight to Elizabeth's side. See how God is arranging things? These women are going to need each other, and building community is one of the things that God does best. Elizabeth needs someone who can have hope *for* her right now; Mary quite literally carries the Hope of the world in her womb. It's like God says to Mary, "Take ME to Elizabeth and let us crush those lies that isolate and divide. Let us remind her that she is seen and loved, that she is Daughter."

I love the image of these women calling out to one another as soon as they are within earshot. When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting she is filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit brings *hope*. Can you imagine them calling out excitedly and then falling into one another's arms?

I can picture Zachariah and the other men working outside nearby, turning in surprise at the sound of this unabashed joy, and then exchanging looks with one another as if to say, “What is going on over there?”

But the sound of their laughter must have played like heavenly music to Zachariah’s ears, because one of the benefits to being silenced by an angel is that it affords you the opportunity to really listen, and it’s been a long time since he’s heard Elizabeth laugh like that.

And when Mary looks over at Zachariah and waves, her smile is warm and reassuring and contagious. When he smiles back at her (he can’t help it), little crinkles form at the corners of his eyes and he realizes that what he should have said to the angel was simply, “Thank you. Thank you for everything.”

He watches as the two women move to go inside. They walk side by side, holding onto one another, still smiling and chatting. Not one of them (not Zachariah, nor Mary, nor Elizabeth) knows exactly what the future will bring. Surely there will be times of darkness ahead, but God is already with them in ways they may not yet fully understand, as surely as he is with us here tonight.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, meet us where we are, in our woundedness, in our loneliness, in those places where we have lost hope. Bring us together, and let us be light for one another. Let us carry the spark of your love into one another’s lives, to speak truth, to speak hope, to remind one another that you see us and love us for who we are, not for what we have or what we do, or even what we’ve done. You love us because we are your children. Amen.

Reflection Questions

1. What parts of Elizabeth’s story do you most closely identify with?
2. What emotions surfaced during prayer? Why, do you think?
3. Did you become aware of any wounds in your heart that God wants to heal?
4. What would it feel like to have a heart like Mary’s? What would change in your life if your heart looked more like hers?

Beside the Manger

by Jane Rowland

***“And the Word became flesh and made his
dwelling among us...”
John 1:14***

For nine months he has waited, silently, in Mary’s womb. He has listened to the muffled voices of Mary and Joseph, to the gentle, steady beat of Mary’s heart, so nearby. God Himself has entered into time, has clothed himself with humanity, all of it: a human body, a human soul, a human heart, a human will. But not (at least not yet) a human voice. In the womb, the Word of God is silent, waiting.

Place yourself in Bethlehem. You are standing in a dusty road. It is twilight. You can smell food cooking over fire; you smell earthy smells—animals, hay. You hear the sounds of a town settling in for the night. Voices trickle through open doorways from families gathered inside and every now and then, laughter rises up from just around the bend. Perhaps you hear a mother calling out to her child, “Come inside, time to wash up.”

Suddenly, from somewhere not too far away, you hear the urgent cry of a newborn baby. All around, the people of Bethlehem carry on. No one even pauses. No one comes running. Why would they? What would clue them in to the fact that they have just heard something that has never, ever been heard before, not like this: the sound of God’s human voice.

Consider for a moment that God could have chosen any voice he wanted from the beginning. In fact, He could have appeared as a fully grown man and marched into Jerusalem. And perhaps right away every knee would have bent, and every tongue confess him Lord....

But that isn’t the way he chose to do things.

Instead, he knit his body together cell by cell, slowly, secretly, in the darkness. He was tiny at first, almost invisible to the naked eye. And then, God *grew*. Can you imagine the angels, curious and amazed, watching this mystery unfold? Watching their God create for himself a body, the God who created matter *becoming* matter.

“What is he doing?” whispers one angel to another.

“He’s giving himself a body.”

“He’s what?? A *body*? What kind of a body?”

“A human one. Look, right there. His heart has just started beating.”

Silence falls over them. They slowly draw back, exchanging wide-eyed looks. Then they gaze out upon all the people of earth.

“Do they know?” One finally ventures to ask.

“No, not yet.”

And they continue to watch, until one day, God draws a breath, filling his new lungs for the first time with earthly air...and then he *cries*. It's what babies do. The cry of a baby is a call, a way of saying, "I need you, come closer." And we usually do, if for no other reason than to stop the crying! So when the Word of God comes to be with us in the flesh, the first thing he says to us is not a judgment. It's not "You've messed things up pretty badly down here." The first thing he says is simply, "I need you, come closer."

Imagine yourself sitting next to the manger, peering down at the newborn Jesus. He is sleeping. Look at his hands, curled up in little fists. Reach out and touch one of them. Look how small it is. These hands will not hurt you—they *cannot* hurt you. These hands will always be tender, never cruel; they will never push anyone away. Some day healing power will course through them and someone's life will be transformed.

Place your hand now on his chest. Feel the warmth of his body and his gentle heartbeat. Your hand rises and falls as he breathes.

What do you feel when you look at him?

As you look at his sleeping face, his mouth twitches, and then his bottom lip puckers out. His breath quickens. He frowns and begins to cry. It's just a little cry right now, pitiful, really. But he's kicked off his covers and his little face just looks *so sad!* Suddenly you see Mary come to the side of the manger, thank goodness. She bends over and scoops up the wiggly baby, but then she turns and asks you if you want to hold him. What would you say to her? How do you feel?

Mary smiles reassuringly and places Jesus in your arms. Feel the weight of his body. He takes a deep breath; he is quieting down. Now he hears *your* heartbeat, and his whole body rises and falls with the rhythm of *your* breath. Go ahead and smell the top of his head. What does it smell like? Feel the warmth of him, his soft skin.

How does it make you feel to know that He is content in your arms?

If you could whisper something in his ear, something that you would want him to remember later, when he's grown, like a little seed of a thought, what would it be? Something you need him to know about a loved one? Something about yourself? Tell him what it is you want him to know.

Let us pray. Dear Jesus, Thank you for coming into the world. Thank you for wanting to be so close to us, for wanting to be held. Thank you for bringing your peace, your love, and your joy. Amen.

Reflection Questions

1. How did you feel when Mary first asked you to hold the baby Jesus? What about after he was placed in your arms? Why did you feel this way?
2. How did it feel to be able to console Jesus?
3. What do you think God might be trying to tell you?

4. What did you want to say to Jesus while you held him?

In the Father's Gaze

by Jane Rowland

***“As the Father loves me, so I also love you.
Remain in my love.”
John 15:9***

We left off with the newborn Jesus asleep in our arms, and now we jump forward a bit in time. Have you ever thought about Jesus as a teenager, with big hands and feet, and uncombed hair? The Second Person of the Trinity! How completely he enters our human condition.... He's living in the quiet little town of Nazareth, learning a carpenter's skills and growing out of his tunic faster than his mother can let out the hem. Maybe today was tougher than usual; it was warm outside and he strained his back lifting something too heavy and now, at last, he has surrendered to sleep.

Imagine that you are standing next to this sleeping boy. What do you feel when you look at him? Consider for a moment that it will be years before he even begins his public ministry. He hasn't really done anything remarkable yet, at least not anything that would get the neighbors talking. He's just the carpenter's kid.

But imagine how his mother might see him.

Imagine her in this scene; she touches his hair and kisses his forehead and whispers, “My beloved son...” She doesn't know how much longer he will be by her side; the angel was short on details. But Mary quietly ponders the mysteries of a life with Jesus even while she surrenders her need to fully understand. She knows who it is who holds her life, her future, her son in His hands. She believes in God's goodness; she remembers the promise: “His kingdom will never end.”

Now imagine how God the Father looks at His boy. Could He love him any less than Mary does? No, never. In fact, God's love is infinite. He continually pours his love out upon his Divine Son. And Jesus rests in His Father's arms with complete trust. He feels the Father's gaze on him and knows, deep within his heart, that he is the Beloved Son. How does Jesus' surrender show *you* the Father? Jesus places his body, his blood, his soul, and his divinity into the Father's hands where he finds strength and peace and love. Imagine God's big, gentle hands underneath him, holding him.

What is it, in this season of your life, that you need to place in the Father's hands?

What are you holding on to, that you could turn over to Love Himself, trusting in his plan, even if you don't know the details?

Is it a person, a loved one? A burden that you carry? A wound, or a fear, that is keeping you from living life abundantly? Maybe it is your past self, something that you have done, that weighs you down. Or maybe it is your future, with all of its unknowns.

When God the Father gazes at you, He looks at you with the same tender delight with which he looks at Jesus. Their love for you is the whole reason that Jesus was sent, the reason He chose to come, to be with you, to be your light.

What is He asking you to surrender to His goodness, to His strength, to His peace?

Think of Mary; she is here. She understands the heartaches of living in a broken world, but she has boundless confidence in God's ability to bring good from all things. "It's going to be ok," she says to you, "Listen to what He is telling you."

Hear God's voice speak to your heart and say, as he did to the prophet Isaiah, "Do not fear: I am with you; do not be anxious: I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand."

Let us pray. Jesus, your heart rests secure in the Father's love. We want that peace, too. We want to feel His hands holding us, sustaining us...to feel His warm gaze of love, and to believe that we are Beloved children. Show us the Father; help us to believe in his goodness. Give us the courage to surrender so that, freed from all burdens, we can live more abundantly in your presence. Amen.

Reflection Questions

1. How did you feel when you looked at the image of the teenaged Jesus asleep?
2. How do you think God looks at Jesus? Do you believe that He looks upon you the same way? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever considered that Jesus was sent for you, personally? What does that mean to you?
4. What is it that God wants you to surrender to him during this season of your life? How might you do that? How do you "live out" surrender; what does it look like?