

Skin and Bones
Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 19, 2021
The Rev. Katherine Bush

“Sixteen years, and/ All that time she thought she was nothing/ But skin and bones.” These are the last lines of James Wright’s poem, “Trouble.” “Sixteen years, and/ All that time she thought she was nothing/ But skin and bones.” It’s a short poem, not actually much longer than the lines I’ve offered you here, and it cuts quickly to the scandal and shame, the taunting and confusion that swirl in a circle of folks when someone turns up pregnant. But it ends with this - with this girl’s amazing realization that while all along she had thought she was nothing much, nothing more than skin and bones - in fact, that was only the beginning of what she was.

Our story today picks up after Gabriel has gone back to wherever Gabriel came from, and Mary has gone to the hill country to find Elizabeth. Both of them are unexpectedly expecting. One of those pregnancies at this point is more welcome, though than the other. It’s quite something. I want to say sweet, not in a cloying, Hallmarky way, but actually sweet and tender that this intimate scene is captured for us and remembered for thousands of years - this scene of two women on the outskirts of nowhere finding each other.

Maybe the word I want is touching. Because in a time when *touching* is still somewhat verboten, I find myself drawn to this story of an embrace. Because you know they must have wrapped their arms around each other, bear-hugged even, and then put their hands on each other and on each other’s bellies - Mary’s still flat, Elizabeth’s round and just now - rippling. In this whole crazy book of cosmic power, and kingdoms come, and drama played out on geopolitical scales, and today we have the intimacy of this picture: two women, one old, one young, laying hands on each other’s bodies. One with skin likely wrinkled and worn and sun-spotted, one with skin tighter, but still just as likely rough. Their skin and bones pressed together.

So, when we say that *we are more* than just skin and bones, the first thing to note is that skin and bones themselves are worthy and lovely and beautiful. Neither I nor, I think, the poet, mean to dismiss the skin and bones-ness of us. Some of us have difficult relationships with our bodies, saying or sensing that they’ve betrayed us or that somehow our bodies are separate. I’ll be the first to say that this is complicated. Still, our bodies are not to be ignored and we are living with this skin and these bones.

Mary’s body is going to bring a wriggling, squirmy baby into the world - a very messy, bodily event. Bodies are going to matter a whole lot this week at the beginning of Jesus’ story on earth, and bodies matter all the way through until his is thrown up on a cross,

tossed in a convenient tomb, and then looked for on Easter morning. Mary's body carrying a baby matters, Jesus' skin first tender and then torn matters. Our skin and our bones are who we are, the shape of us, the container that we carry ourselves around in - God-given and blessed.

And yet. And yet. "Sixteen years, and/ All that time she thought she was nothing/ But skin and bones." The girl in the poem discovers in the midst of controversy and pointing fingers that she is actually more, more than skin and bones. And Mary and Elizabeth pull apart from each other, and Elizabeth sees that Mary is more, so much more than her wayward little cousin. "Blessed are you among women ... the mother of my Lord, here with me " And Mary knows things now beyond what her body has taught her, we spoke/sang/heard her song a few moments ago with its tumultuous vision of God's favor and mercy. All that time she thought she was nothing, but skin and bones. She thought she was nothing, that she was lowly and that her people were nothing, hungry and empty, but now, blessed and remembered and favored and promised. She has a soul like a magnifying glass and a spirit for rejoicing. Elizabeth sees it in Mary as she approaches - shining through her rough skin, maybe it's in the eyes, maybe it's something else altogether. Mary knows it somehow, that she's different, and that everything is different now. She knows it in her bones. She sings it, unable to keep this realization inside her body.

And you, what about you? Did it take you sixteen years and finally after all that time you realized you were something more than skin and bones? Or longer? Or haven't you realized it yet? Or did you know once, but forgot again? Your skin and your bones are so wonderful, and they are good even on the days when you and I wonder about that, and they are carrying us around this big, tumultuous world. And yet, you and I are also so much more than skin and bones. I wonder about those moments when the realization grabs us, as surely as Elizabeth grabbed Mary. When we are touched and touched; when we feel someone squeezing our hand or something opening our heart that and know there's more - more to us, more to our lives, more to this world than we had previously dared to imagine.