

The story I am about to tell you is arguably one of the most ridiculous things that I have ever done, and yet it is also one of my best memories ever because well...you'll see when I get to the end of the story. I've mentioned it before but I am a complete Broadway nerd, and my nerdiness knows no bounds when Idina Menzel is involved. Between *Wicked* and *Rent*, I just have no words for her Broadway greatness, but until 2013 I had never had the privilege of actually seeing her on stage. I had seen her in concert, but never on Broadway. Well that year, it was announced that her new musical was going to be doing out of town previews in DC, which meant that I immediately convinced Kristin that we had to go. So in the middle of the week we hauled down to DC to see it, but here's the thing about Broadway shows...often folks will congregate outside the stage door and the cast will eventually come out after the show and sign autographs. Well, as we were leaving, I see people lining up and I'm like...it could happen! I could meet Idina!! However, it was a week night, Kristin had a two year old at home, and we both had to work the next morning, so...we left.

Now, this is where the ridiculousness comes in. I realized that I now knew the time frame of the show and when it let out. I also realized that there were a few more shows left and one of those was on a Friday night, and if I timed it correctly, I could get there and park before the show let out

and get the perfect spot outside the stage door before the crowds descended. I had my Playbill from the show, it wasn't like I would just be taking up space without having seen the show...so I convinced Ben that the perfect way to spend a Friday night was driving back down to DC, paying for parking, and standing out in front of the stage door waiting for the moment when Idina came out. Did I mention it was in December? Uh huh. But we did it, we stood out there and we waited and I had my Playbill clutched in my hand, and eventually it happened. We met the rest of the cast too, but finally, there she was, and yes my Playbill is now signed, and yes, I got to have a full, legit conversation with Idina Menzel, and yes, I have pictures of that moment, and yes, it was absolutely ridiculous and completely amazing.

I'm sure most of us have our own versions of some sort of celebrity encounter story, and I'm sure if we thought about them, we would be able to take a step back from the awesomeness and recognize how really, really *weird* the whole concept is. I mean, they're *people*, just people. Usually really pretty people, really talented people, but we treat celebrity encounters like an eclipse. Elusive and incredible, and honestly, I'm here for the whimsy of those moments, because whatever gives us joy is a blessing, but it is really weird how these moments make us feel...nervous, awed, fidgety,

tongue-tied, like we have no idea who we are anymore. We almost, almost sound a little bit like Elizabeth in our gospel this morning.

There's so much in our gospel today, honestly there's so much in our gospel *and* the Psalmody. We have this encounter between Mary and Elizabeth and then Mary's song of praise to God for the wonders that are being wrought within her heart and her body, the amazement at the child that is about to come into the world. There's enough for at least six sermons in here if I'm honest, but this year, there were two things that kept sticking out to me as I went through the gospel and I can't get them out of my mind.

The first happens right off the bat. Luke tells us that Mary went *with haste* to visit Elizabeth. She has just had her encounter with Gabriel and found out that she would give birth to the Messiah, and her first instinct is to get out, and we can't blame her. In this situation, Mary, unwed though engaged but not yet living with her fiancé and pregnant, could very easily find herself either stoned to death or burned, depending on if her family was a part of the priestly class. She was in danger immediately upon the annunciation happening, and she knows she has no choice, she has to find someplace safe to go, someone who will understand, who will love her through what is happening to her. So, by herself, this pregnant teenager

travels across the Judean countryside to find Elizabeth whom she knows is also going through a wild ride of pregnancy.

In just a few words, this shows us the fierce tenacity of this girl who would be the Savior's mom. She was brave, she was bold, she was incomprehensibly strong. She was a woman like no other, and in that moment you realize this is why she was chosen for this, she could do this. But you also realize how dangerous, how precarious her situation truly was. Pregnancy is scary enough without throwing in the possibility of execution for it. The reality is, Jesus was raised by a fierce woman.

And Mary was able to be her fully fierce self because she was loved by another equally fierce woman. When Mary enters Elizabeth's house, there is no hesitation, no fear, no questions, no worry. Immediately, John the Baptist leaps in Elizabeth's womb, and Elizabeth can't keep herself from exclaiming with joy. She is astounded. She looks at Mary and it's like she's standing in front of a celebrity. The words fly out of her mouth, Mary and Mary's child are blessed...but *why*, why has the joy of this encounter happened to her? Elizabeth can't process what's happening. Why in the world has she been chosen? Why has the mother of her Lord come to her? Elizabeth knows instinctively that Mary's child is her, the entire world's, salvation. She knows the immense privilege she is experiencing to be in this

moment, and she can't believe that it's possible that of all the places in Israel that Mary could go, she finds herself here, with Elizabeth. How is it that Elizabeth is the safe space for the mother of her Lord? She is completely awed in the face of the reality that is before her. She is floored by the belief, the faith, the courage Mary has displayed and she cannot believe that she has been chosen to be a part of that journey with her.

So, ok, these little, tiny tidbits of the gospel were interesting to me, but what do they have to say to us as we enter into these waning days of Advent? Christmas is on the horizon, schedules are getting into crunch time, our to do lists are probably a mile long, your stress and your blood pressure probably feel a smidge high, so what in the world do a couple of fierce women and an awed encounter have to do with us? I think at a really baseline, simple level...it has to do with excitement. With excitement and our own sense of awe at what we are going to experience, what we are going to encounter this week.

I will whole-heartedly admit that I am always all in on the Christmas magic, but so much of that ends up getting tied up in Santa and presents and twinkle lights and I don't know how much of it we associate with *Jesus*. We say Jesus is the reason for the season, but how much of our passion, our excitement, our awe at this season is actually about Jesus? And that's when

I'm like, we need to take a lesson from Elizabeth. Mary walked in and it was like her whole being reacted. Her own child leapt, her words flooded out, she was amazed. When was the last time you felt that sense of awe, that sense of amazement about Jesus? About your faith? When was the last time you let yourself even think about faith, about what is about to happen this week as something worthy of a reaction like I had standing in front of Idina Menzel? I think we forget that what is about to happen is...mind-bogglingly astounding. I mean...God made flesh. A baby born to love this world so much that he is willing to die for it. God incarnate in a human body who will know what it is to laugh, to cry, to mourn, to dance, to make friends, to eat, to work, to *be*. If that doesn't make your jaw drop, then I think we've missed the magic of Christmas.

And here's the other thing...Mary's fierceness, Elizabeth being her safe space to life in this moment...that is something that we are called to emulate with each other. For as much as we need to take in the awe and wonder of this moment, we also need to be willing to live it out with the gusto and bravery of a teenage girl hauling herself through the wilderness. I mean faith is this incredible thing, being a child of God, a *called* child of God is an incredible, awe-inspiring thing and I think sometimes we're just like eh, ok, cool, I know this but there's a lot of other stuff in the world that

needs my attention and focus. And honestly, living out the faith, the calling God has given to us is scary, it's terrifying sometimes because it calls us into places of uncertainty and we have no idea what we're doing, but instead of running away from it, we should let the fierceness of Mary inspire us to take our faith out into the world and *live* it. Because when we do that, we also show the rest of our siblings that they can dare to live out their faith with us. When they have fears or questions or joys to share, we can be that safe space, just as Elizabeth was for Mary.

Y'all...it is the most wonderful time of the year. It's magical and it's fun and it's harried and it's crazy. It is a moment that is worthy of standing outside a stage door in the cold just to get a glimpse of it, just to be near it. Don't lose that wonder, don't let the chaos of the world overwhelm and distract you from the gift that is coming, don't let your holiday preparations keep you from preparing your heart for your salvation, your peace, your Messiah who is quickly coming. Take a moment this week to soak in the magic, the jaw-dropping awe of God come down to earth to walk amongst us. Take a moment to say thank you that the light is now so bright that the darkness doesn't know what to do with it. Take a moment this week to be someone's safe space. Take a moment this week to be as fierce as Mary. Take a moment this week to let your faith live. **AMEN!!!**