

The woman was exhausted. She had been journeying a long time. She had had no choice. The man had forced her out into the wilderness. A little bread and water was all she had been given. She thought that he had wanted her to die – that she and the child had become an embarrassment to him. That was what the rich old woman, her mistress, had said. Now the situation seemed hopeless. The water had nearly run out and the bread was finished. All that seemed left for her was to die – here in the desert halfway to Egypt. But first she would have to watch her son suffer that same fate - such a bitter and impossible pain.

It hadn't been like that the first time. Not the first time that she had been near this place. That was the time she had run away – had chosen to escape the old woman's cruelty. The child hadn't been born then – although she could already feel the life stirring deep within her. And the life seemed to give her power, to make her determined to seek her freedom for the future. She had come to the spring, the fresh water, and she had seen the angel. Seen him and named him too! They always said that you could not see God – and still remain alive. But she had – at least until now. Perhaps it was now that the penalty was being exacted from her. Perhaps that was why she and the child had to die. For the angel had sent her back to the old man and woman. She had had to go – so that her child could have a name and a family. But it had all led to this. If only she could see another angel, and hear, even for a moment, a voice offering even the smallest part of hope.

The woman was exhausted. She had been journeying a long time. She had had no choice. She had had to leave the town where the child had been born. She had had to leave it suddenly – in the middle of night. There had been no time to make preparations for the long journey, no time to offer farewells and thanks to those who had shown them kindness in the past few weeks. They had had to escape as quickly as possible. The soldiers were coming and the word of their brutality had travelled before them. So now she and the child and her man were here in the desert on the road that led to Egypt. What would the future hold for them in a foreign land? Where they did not speak the language, and where they were simply strangers? Would life with her child always be like this – like a bitter and impossible pain that cut her to the heart?

It hadn't been like that the first time. Not the first time she had gone on a journey. The child hadn't been born then – although she could already feel the life stirring deep within her. And she could remember the words of the angel still echoing within her soul – of the promise of a son who would feed the hungry and defeat the powers of wickedness. She had felt truly blessed when she had seen the angel and heard those words. They had sustained her through the days and months when her body grew and the gossips twittered and the rabbis scowled – before the good old man who had accompanied her ever since had offered to marry her, so that her child could have a name and a family. But it had all led to this. She wondered if the old man was now regretting his kindness. If only she could see another angel, and hear, even for a moment, a voice offering even the smallest part of hope!

The woman is exhausted. She has been journeying a long time. She has had no choice... no choice for herself and her child...

Is she one of the many women in our world forced to journey many miles in search of food and water, to keep her child alive in a time and place of famine?

Is she one of the many who have suffered abuse as a domestic servant, a semi-slave, the target of her master's desires and her mistress's jealousy?

Is she one of those who have had to flee danger and persecution, the terror of military brutality, or political and ethnic cleansing?

Is she a refugee or even economic migrant, who has wanted more than she is entitled to, longing for a future of hope rather than despair for her child?

Is she a person who has scandalised her society, with her fertility the visible sign of moral laws transgressed, and her child, despised and rejected by her kin, an emblem of her guilt?

Is she a woman who has insisted on seeing and listening to God, even when she has been told that this is the task of men?

Is she?...

Is she?...

How can a woman such as this hear the voice of the angel just one more time?

(biblical refs Gen 16; 21.8-21; Matt.2.13-15)