

Revolutionary Love (Advent 4)

Prayer of Illumination

Present God,
Settle our hearts.
Still our minds.
And stir our imaginations,
That we might hear your Word for us this day. Amen.

Luke 1:39-55

Within a few days Mary set out and hurried to the hill country to a town of Judah, where she entered Zechariah's house and greeted Elizabeth. As soon as Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

In a loud voice she exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why am I so favored, that the mother of the Messiah should come to me? The moment your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leaped for joy.

Blessed is she who believed that what our God said to her would be accomplished!"

Mary said:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in you, my Savior.	You have filled the hungry with good things, while you have sent the rich away empty.
For you have looked with favor upon your lowly servant, and from this day forward all generations will call me blessed.	You have come to the aid of Israel your servant, mindful of your mercy—
For you, the Almighty, have done great things for me, and holy is your Name.	the promise you made to our ancestors— to Sarah and Abraham and their descendants forever."
Your mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear you.	
You have shown strength with your arm; you have scattered the proud in their conceit;	The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.
you have deposed the mighty from their thrones and raised the lowly to high places.	_____

Revolutionary Love

I don't know what words come to mind when you think of Mary, the mother of Jesus, but for me, the two words that immediately pop into my head are 'meek' and 'mild.' So I was startled this week when I came across an article about Mary titled, "Mary, Mary Quite Contrary." In it, one of my favorite theologians, Elizabeth Johnson, tells the story of Professor Mary Hines, who was surprised at the beginning of one semester to discover that all of the students registered for her course on Mary were men while all of the students registered for her course on feminist theology were women. "When asked to explain their choices, the men said it was because they knew next to nothing on Mary but as ordained ministers would be expected to. The women, on the other hand, avoided that course because of their negative feelings about what they already knew."¹

I must admit that prior to this week, if you had given me a choice between a course on Mary and a course on feminist theology, I, too, would have chosen the course of feminist theology for the very same reason—because what I thought I knew about Mary never made me think that it was worth knowing more nor even that there was any more to know.

One of the traditions in the church where I grew up was the four o'clock family Christmas Eve service. Each year it was the same—a staged performance of the nativity story where the middle school and high school youth served as narrators and silent actors for the various parts. Because it was such a tradition, there was always some jostling for who would get the plum parts. Often, this meant Joseph for the boys and Mary for the girls, but for me, the best role was always the angel Gabriel.

The costume for the angel Gabriel had these really incredible wings that you got to wear, but even better, in my mind, was the fact that the angel Gabriel only appeared briefly in two scenes. Meanwhile, Mary had to look meek and mild for the whole of the service.

I do think I did get to be Mary in my junior year, but the only service I have any memory of is the one from my senior year when I finally got to be the angel Gabriel. Partly this is because my best friend played Mary and we had a lot of trouble in rehearsal not bursting out laughing, so I remember having to work very hard during the annunciation scene to appear to be looking down at her while actually not making any eye contact for fear of breaking character with uncontrollable giggles.

But mostly I remember that service because the whole time I was standing on the riser in my angelic garb, a small child stood at my feet with their mouth agape convinced that I was a real angel. I mean, who wants to be meek and mild when you can inspire awe in a matter of moments and then go and do as you please?

¹Elizabeth Johnson, "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary," U.S. Catholic Magazine. January 27, 2011.
<https://uscatholic.org/articles/201101/mary-mary-quite-contrary/>

Honestly, for the next ten to fifteen years, the image that came to mind whenever someone mentioned Mary, the mother of Jesus, was my blonde-haired, blue-eyed, quiet best friend wearing a light blue tunic and head-covering, eyes downcast, never saying a word while meekly doing what she was told.

It is, I think, a pretty common image of Mary, probably the image many of the female students in Professor Hines' feminist theology class had as well. And, it's not entirely without merit. Scripture and tradition tell only that Mary was a Jew living in Roman occupied lands, probably only 13 or 14 years old, poor, and engaged to be married to a respectable man. None of which would have worked in Mary's favor when she agreed to the angel's plan to become pregnant. And so it is not entirely surprising that after this angelic encounter she absents herself from the dangerous predicament she is now in, and goes with haste to her cousin Elizabeth, who lives about eighty miles outside of town.

Up to this point, the image we have of Mary fits reasonably well with that of a meek and mild child. We might think she showed some nerve when she agreed to the angel's plan, but it's also possible to view her assent as meek obedience in the face of a surely surprising and likely terrifying angelic presence (at least, that's how I portrayed the angel Gabriel when I got my turn in the role).

However, what occurs when Mary arrives on Elizabeth's doorstep redefines not only the traditional image of Mary, but just about everything else as well. The scene between Mary and Elizabeth is remarkable for a number of reasons, not least because it is one of only a handful of scenes in the entire biblical narrative that feature only women, and the song that Mary sings in response to Elizabeth's welcome is the longest set of words spoken by a woman in the New Testament. It is remarkable because what we see is an older woman who both accepts and embraces not only Mary, but Mary's pregnancy as well. There are no lectures about how she could have allowed this to happen, no conversations of censure or concern. Indeed, Elizabeth sets aside her own incredible joys and concerns so that she can fully welcome and celebrate Mary.

And this is no small thing. Elizabeth, you will remember, is pregnant for the first time with a child who will grow up to become John the Baptist, but she is quite old and her husband, Zechariah, has been rendered mute, so she has plenty of things in her own life to be both joyful about and fearful of, but none of that is what comes out of her mouth. Instead, Elizabeth greets Mary with words of joy, affirmation, and blessing. It is a remarkable scene in which two women stand on very precarious thresholds of not knowing—not knowing if Joseph will stick around, if Zechariah will ever speak again, if Mary's parents will disown her, if the elderly Elizabeth will live long enough to see her son reach adulthood, if either woman will survive the dangers of childbirth, who these children of odd and unfathomable promise will grow up to be—two women who nonetheless “find a way to sing God's praises right from the heart of their burning questions.”²

²Debie Thomas, “At The Threshold.” <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3260-at-the-threshold>

Elizabeth takes what could have been (should have been) very troubling news and translates it into gift, and in the process, she embodies what it looks like to welcome and to extend hospitality. And Mary's response is equally radical. The song Mary sings in response to Elizabeth's welcome is known as the Magnificat because that is the first word of the Latin Translation, which we often translate as "My soul magnifies the Lord." And it is an apt title because magnify is exactly what Mary goes on to do—her song brings God closer, amplifying and deepening our understanding of who God is and what God wants for the world.

She begins by acknowledging her own blessings and attributing them to God, a traditional beginning to a prayer, but she quickly moves from the personal to the political: "you have scattered the proud," she sings, "deposed the mighty from their thrones and raised the lowly to high places. You have filled the hungry and sent the rich away empty." Barbara Brown Taylor writes that Mary was so sure of what she was singing, "that she was singing about it ahead of time—not in the future tense but in the past, as if the promise had already come true. Prophets," Brown Taylor goes on to say, "almost never get their verb tenses straight, because part of their gift is being able to see the world as God sees it."³

But the vision of the world that Mary sees is so political, so radical and subversive, that even two thousand years after she sings it, her words are seen as a threat. In times of oppression and upheaval, Mary's song of praise is one that has continued to be sung by the disenfranchised and the oppressed. It is seen as being so revolutionary that it was banned in India under British rule as well as in Guatemala during the 1980s, and when the mothers of disappeared children in Argentina started putting the world of Mary's Magnificat on protest placards in the 1970s and 1980s, that government outlawed any public display of those particular biblical verses.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the famous German theologian who was killed by the Nazis, once preached that Mary's Magnificat "is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. [It] is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary we sometimes see in paintings ... [it is] a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones."⁴

This is no meek Mary, no mild child. This is a Mary whose fist is raised, a Mary who dreams of a different world and dares to believe that it is God's dream as well. It's not exactly the image of Mary that was portrayed in the Family Christmas pageant when I was growing up. This Mary is a prophet who saw the world through God's eyes and raised her son to see it that way as well.

Mary and Elizabeth. Two women who were pregnant, when (by all rights) they shouldn't have been. Two women who saw God's love as a revolutionary force that was remaking the world, and who understood that God was going to use them and their love to do so.

How will God use your love to remake the world?

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*, 16.

⁴ Advent Sermon, 1993, from *The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Fortress, 2012)