

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena Illinois
December 14, 2014
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell

“Mary’s Song”

Text: Luke 1: 26-38; 47-55

As a child growing up in the Congregational Church, I was fascinated by Mary. Not the Mary I knew from my own Sunday School and church experience. That was really limited to that sweet-faced young woman who sat peacefully at the side of the manger, gazing lovingly at her swaddled newborn son. Once the creche was packed away in the attic along with the Christmas tree ornaments, the lights, and the wreaths, Mary disappeared from our consciousness and from our lessons.

No, it was the Mary of my Catholic friends that captured my imagination. It was the strange (to this little Protestant girl) paintings of the bleeding heart of Mary in a back room of our local museum. It was the statue in the Catholic church where brides left their bouquets. It was the Mary of the rosary how my mother would go ballistic if I came home from playing with a Catholic neighbor chanting those mysterious words of the rosary: “Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee! Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners!”

I am not certain that any of us, Catholic or Protestant, came away with a full sense of Mary’s significance. For some of us, she was incidental, a bit player in the drama of salvation history, the temporary human vessel necessary to carry out God’s plan. For the others, through the encrusting of tradition and doctrine, she became anything but human an eternally pure and perfect icon, saint, and intercessor, the Queen of Heaven.

Either way, diminishing or rejecting outright Mary’s humanity (and her humble status), by elevating her to an exalted rank causes us to miss another picture of Mary that, to me, magnifies the richness of the Annunciation story the announcement by the angel that Mary will bear this special and holy child. That a flesh and blood, ordinary human woman will be the mother of the one who will be called the Christ, the Messiah. She will become large with child will likely have morning sickness and swollen ankles, and, at the end, will suffer the messy, consuming pains of labor before that beloved child will be swaddled and held in her motherly arms.

The Annunciation has been a popular theme in art, particularly in many of the Renaissance paintings. The setting of many of these works is often a piazza or loggia of a grand, maybe even royal, dwelling. Mary is clothed in fine garments typical of the Renaissance times. Hardly reflective of the humble peasant girl of 1st century BCE Israel!

She is pictured with the angel Gabriel, either in a peaceful scene where she is quietly sitting in contemplation or kneeling with her head bent and arms across her body in a

pose of supplication. Unquestioningly submitting herself as befits a woman. But there is another theme that I noticed in some the paintings I saw when I visited Florence some years ago. In these, particularly one by Botticelli painted in 1489 or 1490, Mary is extending her arm as if to ward off the angel and the message. Not an instantaneous acceptance. And, indeed, in Luke's gospel, she does question the angel before her words of acceptance, "Let it be with me according to your word."

That gesture suggests to me the unexpectedness of this encounter, the pure shock of the message! Mary probably had her humble life pretty well planned out. Not that there were many choices in this out-of-the-way insignificant little village. She was betrothed to a local tradesman and would soon marry, have children, and take care of her home and family, just as her mother and her mother's mother had done. But now, in just a few words, her whole life was turned topsy-turvy! God had spoken "No! That is not what I have in mind for you! You are going to be an unwed mother, and your child is not going to be like other children. You are probably going to have a lot of pain and suffering in your life because of this child." And Mary thought about it. She did not say, "No, God. I am too young. Pick someone else." "No, God, I do not speak well enough. I am not up to the task as other prophets selected by God did. Instead, she accepted. And she sang. "My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices, for God has done great things for me and I am blessed." She sang a song of faith and of hope. A song of trust that God would be with her through everything. This was not blind obedience and submission. It was an opening of her ordinary, human heart and going with her radical trust in the God she loved.

We must go to more contemporary paintings for a glimmer of the ordinariness of this young woman. Or to photographs of the girl down the street, someone in your family, perhaps, or in your church or class at school. Nobody special just someone like you or me. Someone who makes plans for the future, hoping for peace and comfort. Someone who does not expect God to break into ordinary life confronting them with unexpected challenges that fly in the face of the carefully crafted plans.

We don't always react well to the unexpected or the unknown, do we? We especially don't want God to surprise us. And yet, we find that sometimes it is those times in life that do not go according to our plan that are the richest. At first, they may not seem like gifts, but often we find that new opportunities open for us that we never would have seen otherwise. Not that there is no pain and struggle in such surprises. But it may be in these times that God is most present to us.

Mary's song does not end with the rejoicing, with the thanksgiving of God looking tenderly upon her, dealing so wonderfully with her that all generations will count her blessed. Her song just begins here, continuing with words and promises that go beyond her own life. Words that foreshadow the whole ministry and meaning of the son she will bear: "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Now we may see a portrait of a Palestinian or Iraqi child peering through a barbed wire fence, yearning for peace and freedom or maybe just enough to eat. Or a child on the streets of Chicago, a

runaway, a victim of abuse, or one struck in a drive-by shooting.

If we overlook this part of Mary's song, or if we think it really doesn't mean what it says, we are mistaken. For God could have chosen someone of importance and rank. God could have come to dwell with the rich and the powerful. But instead, it was to the poor and vulnerable, the outcasts, and the downtrodden. The message for us, then, is that we must take the whole song seriously—that we must not romanticize it or domesticate Mary by leaving her sitting sweetly beside the manger and then storing her in the attic with the Christmas ornaments or perching on a pedestal untouched by human experience. The lowly are still in need of lifting up, the hungry are still in need of being filled. This is a revolutionary story that calls all of us to see Mary as the model that she is. To emulate her example of listening for God's voice and having the faith and trust to respond even when it means upsetting plans and opening life to uncertainty and risk. And being able to sing about it—with joy and anticipation!

There is little hint of the world in which Mary lived in the Nazareth of today. It is no longer an insignificant village but a teeming city that is fraught with conflict. Overshadowing this city is an immense basilica—the beautiful and lavish Basilica of the Annunciation that was built in the 1960s above several older churches and, perhaps, even an ancient synagogue. One of these was built in the time of Constantine over what was believed to be a sacred site—the place where the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary.

Legend has it that this appearance took place by the village well where Mary had come to draw water. So, beneath the basilica is a grotto and an ancient well fed by the same spring that provided water to the village in those times. There is a vessel that can be let down into the well. When I was there, we took turns bringing up and tasting that water. Such a simple thing and yet so very profound—a cool, clear sip of water quenching the thirst of an ordinary person in the first century and that same cool water satisfying an ordinary person two millennia later. Just imagine that. The water of life connecting us generation after generation. God is like that, too—the living water—yesterday, today, and tomorrow filling us with good things, calling us to trust in the surprises, waiting for us to say, "let it be to me according to your word." So may your soul magnify the Lord—who has looked with favor on you and done great things for you.

Amen and amen.