

The Pregnant Virgin, the Old Woman in the Holy Hills, and the Dangerous Song

This morning it is still Advent. We are still in that time of waiting and hoping for Jesus, the new human one, to be born. However much we may long to hear the songs the angels sing to the shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem, this morning we are invited to listen to the stories and the songs that prepared the way for this very, very special birth. This morning, the stories of Mary, Elizabeth, and the Dangerous Song.

Last week we heard from Jane about the story of John the Baptist -- a voice crying out in the wilderness -- Is it something that only happened long ago? Or is it something even more miraculous, something that still is happening -- as in Jane's story of Ian's song at dinnertime in the homeless shelter. "A voice of hope that will not be silenced," she said.

Two weeks ago we heard from Dan about his experience of how he found light and compassion and generosity of spirit in the midst of the suffering and brokenness of our penal system. These instances of unexpected grace breaking in to situations of oppressive systemic poverty and injustice portray something of the nature of advent hope that we heard in a sermon from Gordon three weeks ago. This is how we can live in times when the troubles of the world intensify and try to drag us down. God is with us. Immanuel.

With these stories in mind, and as I turned this week to the first stories of Mary in the Gospel of Luke, I recalled this image from my time at our little clinic on Ninth Street in DC. This is Diane and her newborn son sitting on the back stairs of the clinic. Maybe that was in 1981. I could tell many stories about Diane - her immense struggle with disorder in her family, her difficult pregnancy, the time I got a page coming back from a healing prayer meeting in Baltimore, pulling over to the side of the road, hearing her crying on the phone, us praying together. The way she accompanied a man she loved through the late stages of AIDS and his death in the 1990's. Her later becoming HIV positive, the best anti-viral medicines just becoming available, her becoming a long-term survivor, and a constant advocate for educating people about HIV and AIDS. Before I left the clinic 18 years ago that little boy was heading off to college - to engineering school at Rochester Institute of Technology. She died of something unrelated to HIV/AIDS or its treatment last summer. I will always remember Diane as a woman of deep compassion, great courage, and a certain deep, fierce, and fully feminine love.

Although I'm sure I did not have this in mind back when I took the photograph, in the years since it has brought to my mind the image of Mary and Jesus, of Madonna and Child. It's not exactly the beatific image of Divine Nurture that is more usual and which has been a comfort to so many through the ages. We need the comfort that Mary brings us, maybe now more than ever. But today I want to look at another aspect of Mary, one that is deep, fierce, and fully feminine.

Today we are given the story of Mary and the Angel and her visit to Elizabeth. Maybe I should have said, "extraordinary story," -- sometimes I think that our familiarity with these stories blunts our perception of how extraordinary, even odd, these stories of the events around Jesus' birth really are.

These old stories, I am sure, are given to us not just as interesting history about what God was doing leading up to that most special birth. They are given to us to open our eyes to what God is always doing -- to how Holy Mystery is ever giving birth to the new human one, as Jesus is sometimes referred to in the Bible. These stories speak of presences alive in our world today. Mary. Elizabeth. Joseph. John the Baptist. Jesus. Presences alive in our world today.

At Christmas we sing, "Christ is born today." We do not sing, "Christ was born today," but "Christ is born today." We have always known at some level that these stories help us to see how Jesus is ever and always being born into this troubled world. Often in the least expected places.

Today as I tell this story, I suggest that you be wondering about how Jesus is being conceived, carried, as well as birthed in our day, for this story lives in our day as it has in every day. As you listen to the story, notice if there are particular phrases or images that strike you. When I finish we'll take just a little time to share whatever phrases and or images have struck you. Be prepared to give voice to them when I finish.

So, let me tell you a story --

Once upon a time, long ago, a powerful empire arose and conquered many nations and peoples around the shores of a great sea. The empire ruthlessly ruled the conquered territories with legions and legions of soldiers enforcing the will of the wealthy and powerful emperors who built new cities named after them -- cities like Tiberius and Cesearea. To build the cities taxes on the people increased dramatically. Peasant farmers got to keep less of their grain and olive oil. Fishermen worked long hours to haul in enough fish to feed their families after meeting the quotas for export. The people too often went hungry. The land suffered from overgrazing and from loss of trees cut for lumber for building the new cities. The religious leaders colluded with the empire. Increasingly bandits roamed the countryside, and the social fabric began to unravel.

One day God looked out upon the all that was happening in this world that God created and loved dearly, and God heard the cry of the people and the land, and God decided to intervene. Not a flood, this time; not a plague, not just another prophet even, but something altogether new. Something altogether new.

This was what God did -- God sent an angel, Gabriel by name, to a small unremarkable town called Nazareth in an unremarkable province called Galilee, far from the seat of the empire,. And Gabriel went to, of all people, a young girl about 13 years of age who was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, but she was

still a virgin. Her name was Mary. And Gabriel informed Mary that she was God's favored one, that God was with her, and that God was about to cause her to conceive and bear a son, who would be called Son of the Most High and reign over a kingdom of which there would be no end.

Now -- Mary was seriously perplexed. Full of questions. Why me? How is this possible? The angel assured her that God's Spirit, Holy Mystery, would come upon her, God's power would do this, and the pregnancy and the child to be born would be holy, would be divine, for nothing will be impossible with God. But that was not all. Gabriel also told her that her relative Elizabeth in her old age was also pregnant though she had always been barren. Clearly, something very mysterious was going on.

So how did Mary respond to this little piece of news? This was a lot to take in in a short period of time. There was no way to figure it all out, only that it might well mean, a very, very different life from what been ahead for her up to that time. And what a challenge this posed! A dangerous challenge. But from somewhere inside Mary there arose a deep, "Yes." Something in Mary resonated with this shattering, new, wild possibility and she assented to it, saying, "Here I am, in God's service; Let it be done to me according to your word."

And so Mary, this newly Pregnant Virgin, still perplexed and with many questions, does the very thing that something deep inside her knows to do. She sets out with haste to visit her relative Elizabeth, that old and formerly barren woman who lives in the holy hill country of Judah, and who in an almost equally miraculous way is already six months pregnant. This time there is a husband involved, the priest, Zechariah, but curiously when Gabriel appeared to him, he had some doubts, his response was not an immediate, "Yes," and he was silenced until 8 days after Elizabeth bore him a son.

So the Pregnant Virgin, Mary, sets out on a journey to see the Old Woman in the Holy Hills of Judah, Elizabeth. It's a long journey for a young girl, from Nazareth in the north to the hill country of Judah south of Jerusalem -- a 75 mile hike, if you go straight through Samaria, taking 4 or 5 days, through some rough territory, with Samaritans, bandits, and other ne'er-do-wells all along the way. Quite possibly she joined other travelers as she made her way south.

After that long journey, Mary, this perplexed but thoroughly brave young Pregnant Virgin enters the house where Elizabeth lives and greets this wise elder who will guide and mentor her on the great new quest on which she has embarked. And Elizabeth, in the way in which Old Women who live in the Holy Hills know such things, already knows all about what has happened to Mary. When Elizabeth hears her greeting, the child leaps in her womb, and she exclaims with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

Mary stays with Elizabeth three months. And some time early on, Elizabeth gives Mary the story that is her story. She tells Mary the old story of Hannah. You recall that

in the days of the first kings of Israel, Hannah was an elder, barren woman who prayed through her tears one day in the Temple that if she should be graced to bear a son, she would give that boy over to the service of the priest in the Temple. And so it happened, she gave birth to Samuel, and Hannah was filled with joy, and when it was time, she left him with Eli in the Temple and she sang out her joy, her heart exulting in God, and for the prospect that in this miracle, “The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength” and “Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who are hungry are fat with spoil.” That ancient song takes root in Mary’s heart and she sings it anew -- a song of profound joy, but also a song that challenges everything about the existing order of empire and domination. A deeply dangerous song to sing anew into a troubled and troubling world.

What words, what phrases, what images caught your attention as I told this story? Speak loud, shout out, so I can hear and repeat what you say.

[responses]

Here are several phrases (or images) that I feel belong very much to this story --

The Pregnant Virgin -- there is something very powerful about this particular combination of words that I can’t entirely explain. I think it has something to do with calling forth an understanding of the word, “virgin” that is less about physical intactness and purity than it is about wholeness and sovereign power. The Pregnant Virgin is free of the dictates of family and culture. She is full of courage and a certain fierceness in the face of whatever danger might lie before her. Such a woman was Mary. Such a woman is Mary.

Do you know any young women who possess that fierce, and maybe a bit wild, courage? Anyone here today feel that presence in them?

The Old Woman in the Holy Hills who is also pregnant -- Ancient stories are richly filled with wise old women who often live in caves in holy hills. Grandmothers, wild women rooted in the Earth, medicine women. They still live there. Some of them may be sitting in this room right now! Maybe they are even pregnant in some way. Such a woman was Elizabeth. Such a woman is Elizabeth.

When these two women meet, a transforming fire erupts. Mary left home a somewhat scared, perplexed young girl, newly pregnant, miraculously so, brave enough to take the journey. She returned a confident and expectant young woman, giving voice to an amazing song. She left home singing a song of maternal blessing; she returned shouting out a prophetic song of the coming of God’s reign overturning the existing social, political, and economic order.

I want to say several things about this song, the Magnificat. Here it is in the New Revised Standard Version, listen to it as you might to a young Pregnant Virgin singing it.

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
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.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

I first came to some understanding of the subversive nature of this song of Mary's when I heard a talk by an invited speaker at one of Don McClanen's Ministry of Money retreats up at Wellspring way back in 1998. The invited retreat leader was Walter Bruggemann, an Old Testament scholar who taught at Columbia Theological Seminary, and was the author of several books many of us had read.

Dr. Bruggemann began the weekend by saying that we were then (in 1998) at the edge of important stuff in our world, and he would be speaking about the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts and the church of that time which was UNDOMESTICATED and which turned the world upside down, as it was swept by the Spirit -- the force -- The force is with us. He would repeatedly ask us if we could put our lives down in that narrative, that story, or -- or -- have we put our lives down in a narrative so defined that the Spirit hasn't a chance.

In introducing the Gospel of Luke, Dr. Bruggemann asked us to ponder the stories of Jesus anew -- they are so familiar to us that we have forgotten how odd these stories are. These stories show us that Jesus subverted everything. The church is the small body of the subversives who are the hope of the world.

He spoke of how the author of the Gospel of Luke begins with songs, many derived from the Old Testament -- songs that sing treason against the political and economic power of the world. When Mary sings of feeding the hungry and sending the rich empty away, this is social inversion, a force to come in Jesus who makes all things odd. He went on to say this, "Newness happens in the world when long silenced people get their voice and sing dangerous alternatives."

And one more quote from that talk -- “If we put ourselves down in the Jesus narrative what we face is that there is a power toward newness that is incredibly unstabilizing, that is the subject of faith, and that bends straight to some kind of crucifixion -- but this just might be where our true identity is situated.”

I want to pair that with another, much more recent commentary on the Magnificat -- this by a young woman writer and author of NY Times best selling books, like “A Year of Biblical Womanhood” -- Rachel Held Evans. This is from her blog two weeks ago.

She writes: We like to paint Mary in the softer hues—her robes clean, hair combed and covered, body poised in prayerful surrender—but this young woman was a fierce one, full of strength and fury. When she accepts the dangerous charge before her, (every birth was risky in those days, this one especially so), rather than reciting a maternal blessing, Mary offers a prophecy:

And so in this season, I hear Mary’s Magnificat shouted, not sung:

In the halls of the Capitol Building....

“He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

In the corridors of the West Wing...

“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.”

In the streets of Charlottesville...

“He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.”

Among women who have survived assault, harassment, and rape...

“He has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed.”

Among the poor, the refugees, the victims of gun violence, and the faithful ministers of the gospel who at great cost are speaking out against the false religions of nationalism and white supremacy...

“His mercy is for those who fear him, from generation to generation.”

Rachel Evans goes on to say: With the Magnificat, Mary not only announces a birth, she announces the inauguration of a new kingdom, one that stands in stark contrast to every other kingdom—past, present, and future—that relies on violence and exploitation to achieve “greatness.” With the Magnificat, Mary declares that God has indeed chosen sides.

And it's not with the powerful, but the humble.
It's not with the rich, but with the poor.
It's not with the occupying force, but with people on the margins.

It's not with narcissistic kings, but with an un-wed, un-believed teenage girl entrusted with the holy task of birthing, nursing, and nurturing God.

And she concludes: This is the stunning claim of the incarnation: God has made a home among the very people the world casts aside. And in her defiant prayer, Mary—a dark-skinned woman, a refugee, a religious minority in an occupied land—names this reality.

One final thing worth remembering about this dangerous song: in the midst of the dictatorship that plagued Guatemala during the 1980s, the public praying and reading of the Magnificat was forbidden; it was considered a threat to the state and possible catalyst for revolution. No wonder.

For me, one of the most remarkable things about this song of Mary's is that it is fundamentally a song of joy. "My spirit rejoices!" it begins. It looks out on a world of increasing injustice, of intensifying violence, and sees a powerful alternative, and shouts out joy. This is no cheep joy. It's not sparking tinsel and Figgie pudding joy. Not that there's anything wrong with Figgie pudding, per se. But this deeply rooted joy of Mary's song goes straight into and through the worst of the pain and suffering in the world, -- in our time, the unavelling of nature, climate catastrophe, and bandit empire -- goes fully into that suffering and stands fiercely rooted in an alternative reality marked by joy.

There are other songs out there in this season that invite us to have a merry little Christmas, and perhaps we can understand a need for that sort of merriment at some level. But surely this is not the season to be merry in America. Do we have the courage to know that, and to let loose that dangerous song, the song that Mary sang, and that Mary is still singing. Can we join her and sing that ever dangerous, ever joyful song?

Jim Hall
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