

**Sermon: 20 December 2020 – Advent IV – Luke 1: 26-45 (and 46-55 in song)
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

One of my favourite things about the Nativity narratives in the gospels, is the special role played by those outside the formal power structures: shepherds were considered uncouth and untrustworthy, yet according to Luke they were the first witnesses to the Christ child; the Magi were scholars, perhaps even nobility, but they not from Judea. They were from a different land and a different religious tradition, yet according to Matthew were drawn by God to bear homage to the newborn Messiah.

And there's Mary: pregnant while betrothed, and, according to Luke, from Nazareth in Galilee rather than from Jerusalem, a city that was in so many ways, the heart's home of Judaism ... and yet this very young woman from a town up in the northern hills, is chosen from among all women to birth, nurse, love, and teach Jesus.

That is no small thing, being the mother of Jesus, in trinitarian theology the mother of the 2nd person of the Holy Trinity. Even the angel refers to her twice as "highly favoured among women". And when we add to that, the many strands of Christianity that emphasize Mary's virginity, it's not hard to see how her "uniqueness" gets emphasized more than her "connectedness." But today's gospel reading, and Mary's response which we will hear in song, tell us that we are not mistaken in seeing her connectedness:

- After telling her about her unusual and unexpected pregnancy, the angel informs her that she's not the only one, saying, "Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."
- Mary affirms this connection with Elizabeth, by going to her. As the story goes, the child growing in Elizabeth's belly quickens, and the connection between Elizabeth's child, John the proclaimer, and Mary's child, Jesus the Messiah, only deepens the connection between their expectant Mothers.
- And then, Luke reports that Mary sang a song of joy, known commonly to the Christian Church as "The Magnificat" – a song that Luke's listeners would immediately connect to the Song of Hannah, sung hundreds of years earlier when Hannah had given birth to the prophet Samuel. And the content of Mary's song is full of connections as Mary, the self-declared "humble servant" of God, identifies with God's mission to scatter the proud, topple rulers from their thrones, and send away the rich, while at the same time lifting up the humble, filling the hungry with sumptuous food, and restoring the power and dignity of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah.

At this moment, I step aside and we have the great joy of hearing Cathy Robinson sing, "My Soul doth magnify" ** see end notes – a sung rendition of Mary's Magnificat Listen for those key phrases: "God scatters the proud. God hath exalted the humble in heart. God hath fed the hungry with good things".



Even though the part of Mary's story that tends to be most widely remembered, is the *uniqueness*, it's the *connectedness* that moves the story forward. Mary is connected to Elizabeth, to Hannah, to God's agenda with the humble, the poor, the oppressed, an agenda that will be shouted out by Elizabeth's son John the Baptist and embodied by Mary's son Jesus. My friend Robin and I have discussed that throughout the Scriptures, there are many accounts of women in difficult circumstances who take a prominent and unforgettable place in our faith history, and Mary's situation and proclamation connect her with women like Eve, Sarah, the Hebrew midwives, Miriam, Rachel and Leah, Hannah, Bathsheba, Ruth and Naomi, Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, the woman at the well, the unnamed female disciples, Lydia and other women who led early house Churches. Mary, mother of the Christ child, is amidst this great cloud of female witnesses to God's powerful presence with those who seek a world governed by justice and reconciliation and peace.

Jan L. Richardson, in this year's Advent Retreat, says this about Mary's encounter with Elizabeth and the resultant song:

"Her ears ringing with Elizabeth's blessing, Mary pours out a song, a cry of hope that echoes the one raised by her foremother Hannah after giving birth to Samuel. The powerful brought down from their thrones! The lowly raised up! The hungry filled with good things! The rich sent away empty! But Mary sings about these things as though they have already happened! A tiny child in her womb, and God has transformed the world? What sort of outrageous hope is this?

"Mary knows in her soul, in her womb, that radical hope is found at the boundary where the outrageous gives way to the possible. A child given to her aged kinswoman? The courage to say yes to Gabriel's invitation to her, an unwed woman? Well, then God might as well have turned the world into one where all things are possible! Even justice. Even freedom.

"Mary knows that some things are so outrageous that sometimes we have to talk about them as if they have already happened in order to believe they could ever come about. And so if we believe that God has brought justice to the world, we live that justice, and we share in making the world more just. If we believe that God has brought healing to the world, we live that healing, and we share in making the world more whole....

"God invites us, like Mary, to open to God's radical leading, to step out with sometimes inexplicable faith, trusting that we will find sustenance. 'Hope,' writes W. Paul Jones in *Trumpet at Full Moon*, 'is the simple trust that God has not forgotten the recipe for manna.'"

And so we hear Mary's song of commitment, of connection, of liberation, not just as a far-off hope, or as wishful thinking, but as an expression of how and where God's promise of radical, powerful, world-changing love is already at work. God's love is at work, when and where we embody it. God's love is at work, when justice is spoken, enacted, demanded. God's love is at work, when self-centeredness stands down, when structural and attitudinal change give space and priority to the needs of those who are disenfranchised and pushed to the margins. Mary's voice takes up this song of the ages as something that is already present yet not yet come to fruition, God's process of new promise mirroring what is happening with Mary's body and life.

On this Sunday of love – Mary’s Sunday – the Sunday when the Magnificat connects us, through the witness of countless women of faith, to God’s agenda of new life and transformation – may our spirits be lifted and encouraged and empowered and connected to that same holy agenda. May God’s love, already stirring in us and amongst us and beyond us, guide us in this day and in a new day. Amen and Amen.

References cited:

Richardson, Jan L. <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/-Illuminated-Advent-Retreat--Week-3--Sunday.html?soid=1102292275960&aid=LriPwKGoKJo>

****MY SOUL DOTH MAGNIFY – JOHN PURIFOY**

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*My soul doth magnify, my soul doth magnify, my soul doth magnify the Lord.
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. He hath done great things,
and holy is His Name.*

*His mercy from generation to generation He shows with his mighty arm,
He scatters the proud. He hath exalted the humble in heart.
He hath fed the hungry with good things.*

He hath spoken to our fathers and so us now and forever.

*My soul doth magnify, my soul doth magnify, my soul doth magnify the Lord.
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.*

He hath done great things, and holy is His Name.

My soul doth magnify the Lord!