

**Sermon: Sunday, December 17, 2023 – Advent IV – Luke 1: 26-38 (and 46-55)
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

The Religious Studies program at University of Regina had some memorably good professors, one of whom was the Jesuit priest and scholar Fr. Isidore Gorski. His course, “Jesus of Nazareth” – a course about the quest for the Historical Jesus which was always full with a waiting list – was subtitled, “A funny thing happened to Jesus on the way to the gospels.” The same thing could be said about Mary the mother of Jesus. Between the actual lives of Jesus and Mary, and the purposeful presentation of their stories by the gospel writers, there is a complex space of politics and religion and faith and hope in which the life stories of Jesus and Mary were shaped in ways that were more theological than historical.

I start by naming this, because to me it needs naming: in addition to the big theological beliefs I have about Jesus Christ, is a belief that Jesus of Nazareth was a real historical figure and yes, he had a mom. And I also believe that each of the gospel writers knew that the task at hand for them was more about *meaning* than about details. Their descriptions of Mary illustrate the way that a loving God relates to humanity - an intimate, in-dwelling relationship that states that all of humanity and, in fact, all living beings, are beloved ones of God.

If approached from this angle, the shaping of Mary’s encounters with the Holy direct us toward meaning and illuminate our interplay with God, rather than getting caught up trying to prove the details of a story that, admittedly, requires a fair chunk of suspension of disbelief. While recognizing that constructing a historically accurate Mary is at least as daunting a task as constructing a historically accurate Jesus, Mary’s interaction with the Divine in the 1st chapter of Luke gives me a portal to ponder *my* responses when God shows me what I am called to do in my relationship with the world.

New Testament Professor and Marian scholar Beverly Roberts Gaventa notes that not only do we not know a lot about Mary *specifically* – the gospel writers aren’t clear, for example, as to whether she was from Nazareth or Bethlehem - we also know little about the role of women in general in Jewish society of the day. Official sources state that women and girls lived much of their lives in the household, unseen by men, yet passing references in the Bible suggest that women moved freely and were actively involved in commerce. And if we look for information about how a young, betrothed girl in those days would approach the news that she was pregnant, we can surmise that her situation was precarious but there is nothing to be found outside of what is written by Matthew and Luke. So in summary, I know only a small bit about Mary, except that I know that she has a LOT to teach me.

One thing we learn from Mary, is that God’s approach to us is sometimes based on our hopes and yearnings, but other times God perceives something in us needs that to be engaged in ways we may not have imagined. Many of the most famous Moms in the Bible were women who had long yearned to have a child: Sarah, who was well past childbearing years when Isaac was born; Hannah, who prayed fervently for a child then when Samuel was born dedicated him to serve in the Temple; and Elizabeth, Mary’s older kinswoman who would give birth to John the Baptizer. Yet unlike these women, who prayed that they would *have* a child, Mary *was* a child. By her answers to the Angel it was clear that she had some idea of where babies came from, but we’re not entirely sure that she and her Mom had discussed the topic at length. When Hannah and Elizabeth found out they were with child, they were jubilant in their disbelief; as for Mary, well, it was just disbelief. Whatever exactly it was that a man did that would get a girl pregnant, no man had done to her, so the angel had some explaining to do. As much as there is a strong *literary* link between the stories of Hannah, Elizabeth and Mary, from a *practical* standpoint their stories are tremendously different. Mary responded with grace and clarity, but it was mostly God’s initiative that identified her as the right person to birth, raise and nurture the Messiah. God

continues to identify gifts and capacities in us that we may not claim for ourselves, and you can fully expect that God will continue to call us to walk unfamiliar paths. Perhaps not as unfamiliar as Mary's, but not necessarily our plan, either.

A lesson that Mary can keep on teaching me, for sure, is the power of pondering. It's one of my favourite lines in Luke's nativity story – "Mary treasured these words and pondered them in her heart" (Lk. 2:19) – and her exchange with the Angel at the Annunciation includes some time spent unraveling the implications of all this. Online Bible commentator Debie Thomas writes about Mary's response to the Angel, "For better or for worse, I can't relate to a person who leaps headlong into obedience. I can relate, however, to the one who struggles, to the one whose 'yes' is cautious and ambivalent." In these days when rapid-fire, off-the-top-of-the-head answers get the most followers or the most clicks, as people of faith and as a faith community we are called to depth: to ponder, to observe, to listen, to embrace our fears as well as our potential joys, and to take the time to ask God to help us be people of radical, engaged love. God, through Mary, calls us to be a people whose actions are grounded in contemplative wisdom.

Another thing we can learn from Mary is found in her name. The Very Rev. Lois Miriam Wilson, past-moderator of The United Church of Canada, writes (p.98)

"The names Mary and Miriam come from the same Hebrew root *marah* which denotes obstinacy, contrariness, rebelliousness, and revolt. It can also mean 'plump and strong' which at that time was equivalent to 'beauty.' For two thousand years interpreters have presented the 'beautiful' Mary, but contemporary women are opting for an interpretation that can acknowledge the coexistence and complementary nature of 'revolt' and '[earthy] beauty.'"

For the original hearers of her story, the name Mary may well have signified this mind-of-her own, earthmother, "built for strong" kind of woman. And in hearing this, I realize that I underrate this aspect of Mary. Yes, as outlined in the gospels her circumstances were difficult, even marginal, but I find myself drawn to this notion of her strength. And if we view Mary as forceful, rather than submissive, as bold, rather than mild, as determined, rather than overwhelmed, the song that Mary sang in response to the heavy responsibility that had been placed on her – commonly known as The Magnificat (Luke 1: 39-45) – fits her personality well. In this song, reminiscent of other Biblical songs of protest and praise, Mary expresses the very nature of God, and what God will accomplish in the son, Jesus: God scatters the proud, brings down the mighty, sends the rich away with empty hands. God lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry with good things, shows mercy to the family of faith. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in their book, *The First Christmas* (pp.99-127), call Mary's Magnificat "an overture to Luke's Gospel in which we hear themes that will appear again and again: an emphasis on women, the marginalized, and the Holy Spirit." What Mary states in the Magnificat states God's intention and agenda, and the rest of the gospel of Luke tells of how that agenda is fulfilled.

And Mary speaks to us, not just as observers of what God is doing, but as participants. When she presents us with that divine agenda, she speaks not only of *her* life as mother of Jesus, but of *our* lives as those called to make room in *our* deepest being for God's agenda of engaged, powerful love. We are called by Mary, as she was called by the Angel, to open our lives to what God has planned: lifting the lowly, filling the hungry, showing mercy, scattering the proud, deflating the pride and influence of the rich and powerful. Young Mary gives voice to God's deepest hopes for this world and its people, and those hopes remain constant each time we examine the world around us and wonder where God is calling us to be.

Mary's voice – strong and clear - speaks on behalf of all who are regarded by the world as powerless or inconsequential, and calls us to take sides in favour of those who are under attack, or pushed to the fringes. She gives voice to everyone in history – in particular, every *woman* in

history – who has attempted to bring honour to God even though those around them are doing their best to silence them. And quoting now from a sermon preached years ago by my spouse, Shannon, “God chose a poor woman to be a partner in birthing Godself into the world, and this goes against our ideas of power and how to ‘get things accomplished’ in our world. Fact is, God continues to be revealed most powerfully in our world through those who are ignored or despised by the structures and powers of society, and that unsettles us. God dwells in the very womb of the poor, and the poor are both the bearers and midwives who birth God into the world”.

There are so many statues of Mary, so many paintings of Mary, so many carved or cast versions of Mary in our nativity sets, that she may run the risk of being seen as static, fixed, adored but not engaged. Yet the dynamic stories of the interaction between this adolescent girl and heavenly messengers invite us to dynamism as well. Mary, in the fine tradition of King David, nearly all the Hebrew Prophets, the Shepherds and the Magi, speaks as one who was identified by God as one to reach beyond expectations, and encourages us to embrace God’s calling in our lives. While the beloved details of a child born amidst livestock and laid in a manger seem so far away, both in time and space, Mary invites us to put ourselves in the picture, in this season when we contemplate the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. God seeks in us a home, a dwelling-place, a heart willing to be loved by God and to express brave, powerful, tangible love in God’s name.

As the sermon draws to a close, we move from the Annunciation – the Angel’s interaction with Mary – to Mary’s bold response, the Magnificat. Our hymn is The Canticle of the Turning - “My Soul Cries Out” (MV 120).

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