

Luke 1: 39-45 “Elizabeth & Mary” Rev. Janet Chapman 12/22/24

We have been taking a spiritual journey these past weeks of Advent preparing to greet the newborn Messiah once more in our lives. That path which is known as the Way of the Lord is rarely straight, is almost always rocky, and consistently filled with obstacles. It's a rough road to navigate but if it were easy, everybody would tag along. As it is, many lose interest, get distracted and busy, and simply decide to sit this one out. It's hard to keep an attitude of Advent, of preparation, waiting and watchfulness, in a time which says, “Why wait? Open those presents now... party like there's no tomorrow... join the frenzied pace and ignore the clutter!” But here in these times of worship, we have been trying to slow things down a bit, we've tried to clear out the cluttered heart so there is ample room for the dear Christ to enter in, as the hymn says. Today's story is an example of doing just that.

The encounter between Mary and Elizabeth is a familiar one, but there are hidden kernels of wisdom that often get overlooked. One of the first is the personality of Mary herself. For generations, Mary has been depicted as helpless, meek, mild, and mindless. In an effort to glorify Mary, church tradition revealed her in portraits as beautiful, passive, and often dressed in blue, an attempt to reflect royalty. As lovely as all that is, none of that comes from scripture and has often been used to subjugate women. Mary would have never worn blue, for dye such as that would have been impossible to come by for someone of her status and stature; her garb would have been flaxen-wool colored. The church has added texture or layers to Mary which would not have existed 2000 plus years ago. Luke is the only gospel writer to share anything about Mary and he reveals her as filled with grace, which gets interpreted as submissive and weak. This interpretation has been harmful to millions of women over the centuries. When we read Luke carefully, we come to understand that this grace is anything but submissive and that the power of God is never meek. As revealed in Mary's conversation, actions, and the Magnificat song, we witness courage, boldness, grit, maturity, and convictions about justice. We see that resolve reflected in the video shown earlier of a young girl unwilling to tolerate oppression and persecution.

This is the kind of grace Luke speaks of that fills Mary's soul and it is what attracts God's attention. Yes, it is true she is startled by the presence of the angel. So were Gideon, Jacob, Jonah and the shepherds of Bethlehem, to name a few. Like Mary, they questioned the angel in wonder, doubt, and even resistance. They are even noted for their reluctance, but Nancy Rockwell reminds us that no one ever says Mary was also reluctant. Why is that, do you think? We see her as perfectly submissive, without hesitation, when that is not what the text says. Mary dares to ask the angel, "What sort of greeting is this?" The angel answers and then later, Mary challenges the angel, "How shall this happen to me, when I have no husband?" God has chosen a spunky and very determined woman!

Interestingly, we never see Mary doing housework like other biblical women. We meet Sarah in her tent, baking cakes; Rachel is drawing water at the well; Bathsheba is taking a bath; Martha is fussing around in kitchen; and the woman who lost the coin is sweeping the house. But we never hear of Mary cooking, cleaning or washing anything. The likelihood is that she did those things, but such activities are never referred to, possibly out of embarrassment that the mother of Jesus would be relocated to such actions. What a sad oversight which has led to constant downplaying of the significance of caring for the home. Instead, we are given evidence of her love of adventure and challenges. What we find her doing, over and over, is traveling, taking journeys that involve risks and an element of danger. Traveling by herself, something hardly ever done by a woman in first century Palestine, she goes to her cousin Elizabeth after finding out she is pregnant. This is the practice of prophets, who often traveled alone, not the practice of a meek young woman. It would have taken a week to walk that far and most of the terrain was uphill. And yet she took the risk. Meister Eckhart, 13th century German mystic, writes of Mary's legacy saying "We are all called to be mothers of God – for God is always waiting to be born." God is always waiting to be born.

Faced with an unplanned pregnancy that was both divine and disruptive, Mary knew the promise within her womb wouldn't shield her from societal scandal. With no

mention of support from Mary's mother, we instead witness Mary on her way to declare her agenda, an agenda that would be filled with winding paths, rocky obstacles, and stumbling blocks of all kinds. Her cousin greets her and immediately unites with her in the agenda of making straight the pathways of God. The offspring in Elizabeth's womb literally kicks off the preparation for the Holy One. Ironically, both women are now carrying unplanned, high-risk pregnancies in vulnerable situations and find their wellbeing threatened by those who would attempt to take away their choices, their voices, and their integrity. God trusted these women, but others didn't and their freedoms were in jeopardy.

Faced with such danger, Mary doesn't cower from her circumstances, but she chooses one of the most powerful forms of resistance there is – she sings. Singing is not just an act of joy and camaraderie, it is an act of resistance in so many ways. The slaves knew this. David Lose points out that when the slaves sang their spirituals, they were both praising God and protesting the masters who locked them out of worship. They used songs to deliver important traveling messages about the road to freedom, such as the infamous underground railroad, as well as to proclaim the promise of deliverance as revealed in scripture. The civil rights leaders knew the power of song, singing “We Shall Overcome” when so many in society didn't give them a chance to advance their cause of justice. The protesters in Leipzig in 1989 knew this as well. While it often gets overlooked in the histories of the “velvet revolution,” it is striking to note that several months preceding the fall of the Berlin wall, the citizens of Leipzig gathered on Monday evenings to sing by candlelight around St. Nikolai church – the church where Bach composed many of his cantatas. Their numbers grew over 2 months from a little more than 1000 to 300 hundred thousand, over half the citizens of the city, singing songs of hope, protest, and justice, until their song shook the powers of their nation and changed the world. Later, when someone asked one of the offices of the East German secret police, why they didn't crush this protest like they had others, the officer replied, “We had no contingency plan for song.”

Mary and Elizabeth understood this power as well. They knew how ridiculous their situation was – two women, one too old to bear a child, one so young she wasn't yet married, yet called to bear children of promise through whom God would change the world. They probably knew how little account the world would pay them, tucked away in the hill country of Judea, far from the courts of power and influence. They knew how hard life was under Roman oppression, yet when faced with the path to come, they didn't retreat, or apologize, or despair, they sang. They sang of their confidence in God's promise to upend the powers that be, reverse the fortunes of the unjust world, and lift up all those who had been oppressed. Mary's story is that of a prophet who is determined, not docile; free, not foolish, holy, not helpless; strong, not submissive. She beckons us to speak out for God's justice, which is waiting to be born into the world. She reminds us that when your back is against the wall, and all looks grim, one of the most unexpected and powerful things you can do is sing. That is what happened at Randy's bedside last Tuesday which shouldn't surprise those of you who know Gail; it is what we will do next Sunday in our Christmas sing-along at the one worship service we'll have at 9:30. Singing of light in a world of darkness is, indeed, nothing short of an act of resistance; it is praising God and finding that resolve to let the light shine on in the darkness. Let the song be born in you this day!