

Advent 4C
Luke 1:39-55

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We have been on a journey together this Advent season. The readings have layered a revealing of the Messiah, a systematic rolling out point by point of the Christian claim that Jesus was the one of whom the prophets foretold. The prophets have acted like guides who lead us to the city of Bethlehem and to the scene we will encounter on Christmas morning, to wonder about the strange revelation of the Messiah as a weak, poor, vulnerable baby in a manger. We began this Advent with Jeremiah, who told us “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. (Jeremiah 33:14)” The Second Sunday Luke told us of John the Baptist, fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy that there would be “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Last Sunday we heard from John the Baptist himself, saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.””

It feels to me like a baseball game: it is the best kind of inning for the home team. The score is currently Forces of Darkness 3, Yaweh’s Witnesses 1. The bases are loaded and it is time to bring the runners home. We have had good hits the past three Sundays that have put the prophets Jeremiah, Isaiah, and John the Baptist on base. To continue the baseball theme: these guys are the heavy-hitters, every kid on the block has their stats memorized, and they have bobble-heads and gnomes of them for sure. The bases are loaded, the crowd is leaning in, all eyes are on the batter as he strides up – but wait! It’s a GIRL! It’s a pregnant girl! This is shocking!

In his Gospel, St. Luke tells us that after her encounter with Gabriel and learning of the child she would bear, this girl Mary “set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.” I wondered this week about the forces, the stresses in her life that sent young, single, pregnant Mary out of her parents’ home, her familiar town, and onto the paths that led her that town in the hill country. She was a girl who is made up of tough stuff – she had determination that filled her with strength the world had never seen before: she was a refugee in an occupied land; she was a young woman pregnant under suspicious circumstances. She sought confirmation of what the angel told her – that her cousin was pregnant. She sought sanctuary with someone who might understand her situation, her older cousin, Elizabeth. When she got the confirmation that what the angel said was true in Elizabeth’s greeting, she let out a revolutionary cry that flew like a perfect hit right over the back boards. It revealed to the world who she was despite all visible appearances. She proclaimed to the world that would cast her out:

*From this day all generations will call me blessed: *
the Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his Name.*

Commentator Matthew Skinner writes of Mary, that “In her world, she’s a bit player in a Jewish and Roman political drama starring gods, emperors, elites, and generals. Why should her vision matter? She could be just another idealistic teenager dreaming of a future that sounds entirely out of touch with the real world. But Mary doesn’t just imagine a changed reality; she demands it.” She makes a claim about what God is doing with her and in the world. Mary is a teenager fed-up with the status quo and convicted that God is on the verge of changing everything because an angel told her so; and she has nothing to lose. She is the game changer. Some call her *Theotokos*, the God-bearer. She calls herself the “Handmaiden of the Lord.” Most call her simply, Mary. She found sanctuary in the arms of her cousin, Elizabeth. But she found revolution in her conviction that she had been called by God.

I want us to place ourselves in the shoes of this young woman in her place and time and think about what Mary might look like had God worked his will in her in our times. We can think of an occupied land, a place where the populace are tortured or crucified because they are in the way of the oppressors or to keep the people in a

perpetual state of terror. Maybe a few countries come to mind: Syria, El Salvador, Somalia, Burundi... What if she were a young woman in the Congo? Perhaps she would be a Yazidi girl hiding out on a mountainside? Maybe we'd find her in the throngs of refugees crossing the border into Greece? Perhaps she'd be an Assyrian Jew or Christian from one of the last pockets remaining in a homeland overrun with vicious Islamo-facists? In Luke's Gospel, we meet this vulnerable young woman, Mary, as she arrived in Zachariah and Elizabeth's home. We will meet her again in Bethlehem on Christmas morning we encounter this vulnerable mother with her newborn baby in a manger in an out of the way town in the middle of nowhere. In knowing her vulnerability, I think we meet our own. In what ways are we feeling vulnerable? How are we facing the obstacles and fears the world is offering us? What has the world set into our paths – causing us to change course and run?

Within that teenager, God had planted the seed, a child to be born, and the world would never be the same. God was working something wonderful through Mary and she proclaimed to the world that it will change and it is nothing short of a revolution. She told the world:

*He has shown the strength of his arm, **
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.
*He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, **
and has lifted up the lowly.
*He has filled the hungry with good things, **
and the rich he has sent away empty.

With this child, the Child Jesus whom Mary carries, the rulers, wealthy, the powerful of the world would be toppled and those who had suffered, the poor, the down-trodden, the losers would be raised up. As Mary stepped up to the plate, the Forces of Darkness would never be able to overcome the force of light and love she carried within her – she put it all into her swing. The Son of Righteousness was shining, a glowing ember of potential and change to come within this young woman's womb.

Grace in the World

I think it is that very vulnerability of Mary – knowing that the World was stacked against her by virtue of her birth, her time, her youth, her sex, and her pregnancy – that we find our very own vulnerability. But we also experience the wonder of witnessing God taking that vulnerability and making it Mary's strength and transforming her into a bold prophetic voice. Sometimes it is the unexpected, unlikely looking people that show us who God is and what he is calling us to be – the ones who herald God's revolution, point to evidence of the Kingdom among us. We need to keep our eyes open, to stay alert for the witness in our time that God is continuing his work of showing His strength: casting down and lifting up, filling the hungry, revealing corruption, showing mercy, spreading His love to all his children.

Where will we find the unlikely one who destabilizes our comfort in this world with the sure comfort of God's Kingdom? Who is pointing the way to Bethlehem and the revolution of justice, light, peace, and love? Poet Thomas John Carlisle wrote of Mary that she is: "*An offense against our apathy, this pathetic refugee mother.*" Perhaps we will find our apathy offended by the fed-up teenagers proclaiming a call to revolution, to up-end the status quo and injustice of the world they are about to inherit. Perhaps it is by the plight of the Syrian refugee whose story will crack open our hearts. Maybe we will find our apathy crumbles in the realization of our own vulnerability as we lean on God's promises fulfilled in Bethlehem. As Mary declared:

*He has come to the help of his servant Israel, **
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
*The promise he made to our fathers, **
to Abraham and his children for ever.

Amen.

ⁱ Matthew L. Skinner, *Learning from Mary in Our Age of Endless War (Luke 1:39-55)*, Odyssey Networks December 14, 2015 ON Scripture – www.odysseynetworks.org