

SERMON 12-15-2019 *Singing Ahead of Time* Luke 1: 39-56

We Protestants are not totally comfortable with Mary, the mother of Jesus. Catholic Christians find great comfort in praying to Mary and honoring her as special among the saints. They take their cue from today's scripture reading where Mary sang that "all generations will call (me) her blessed." But we Protestants... not so much. In fact, except for admiring her faith and her hard journey to Bethlehem during Christmas, and having some sympathy for her grief as a mother during Holy Week, we mostly ignore her.

And yet, this morning we heard her relative, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, call Mary most blessed woman among women. There are other women in the Bible who were much more dramatic though- Sarah, the wife of Abraham, who miraculously gave birth to Isaac, the son of promise in her old age, or Miriam, sister of Moses and Aaron, who helped lead the children of Israel out of the wilderness, or Deborah the female judge of Israel, or Jael, the female warrior of Israel, both of whom led the nation to military victory when the male army captains were too afraid to fight. Or young Queen Esther who stood up for her people when there was a plan to slaughter them, or Priscilla, a leader and teacher in the early church Paul highly praised. None of them were called most blessed among women although their actions took great faith, courage, uncommon strength, and wisdom. Only Mary. Perhaps we Protestants need to pay attention to this most blessed of women. And so today we listen to Mary's song.

Mary was a young woman, perhaps as young as 13 or 14 years old, a fairly normal age to be engaged to be married to Joseph. Luke tells us that the angel Gabriel came to Mary calling her highly favored by God and invited her to be the mother of God's Son who was coming to be Savior of the world. Mary was offered a starring role in God's coming drama. There was just one very big hitch- it wouldn't happen naturally because she was married to Joseph; she would become pregnant by the work of the Holy Spirit even before the wedding. Was she willing? And Mary answered in those famous words of faith, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." Her words mirrored the response of the prophet Isaiah when the Lord asked him, "Whom shall I send?" and Isaiah said, "Here am I, send me."¹

After she said yes, nothing was ever the same for Mary. Joseph threatened to back out of marrying her when she told him she was pregnant. Her story of an angel visit made no sense to him (would we believe such a story today?). But then

¹ Isaiah 6:8

Joseph had his own angel visit and learned that it was true. They lived in the small town of Nazareth and we know how news and gossip spread in small towns, everyone knows everybody's business, and Mary would soon be a pariah. An unmarried pregnant young woman was damaged goods, considered immoral and could have been stoned, and any man who married her would be forever considered a fool.

No wonder Luke tells us that right after the angel's visit Mary left town to go see her elderly relative Elizabeth. Elizabeth was the wife of a priest having her own miraculous baby so surely Elizabeth would understand. Elizabeth would surely have wise advice. But before Mary could even tell her the news, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and began shouting as soon as she heard Mary's voice, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you bear!" And before Mary could ask how Elizabeth had even heard the news, Elizabeth said her own baby leaped for joy inside her. "Blessed are you," she said.

But let's look at the idea of Mary being blessed for a moment. We usually think of being blessed when things are going right, our prayers are answered, our needs are met, our life is smooth and easy. That's when we talk about feeling blessed. We say things like, "I was really blessed in worship today." And we usually mean that the music, sermon, or prayers touched us, and we came out feeling closer to God. But Mary's life wasn't smooth, or easy, it didn't feel at all good, and it was only going to get harder. In fact, a devout man named Simeon will soon tell her that a sword will pierce her soul because the child she was carrying would be misunderstood, accused of blasphemy, rejected, and then finally killed. Where was the feeling of being blessed in that?

Mary was blessed the way Jesus talked about being blessed in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus used the word blessed to describe having a deep sense of joy and shalom, or peace, because God is present. When God is present, we can have peace and joy even in the stress and problems of life. God will take care of our needs. So Jesus says "Blessed are the poor, those who are hungry, those who weep and mourn, those who are hated and persecuted." None of us see being poor, hungry, mourning, hated or persecuted as being blessed. These situations are more likely to be the things we ask for prayer about. "Take them away, God!" Yet, Jesus says those who cling to God are blessed, regardless of their circumstances, because being a part of what God is doing is worth whatever it costs. There is a deep sense of joy and shalom when we choose to believe in what we cannot see. Blessed. Elizabeth knew it and now Mary did too.

Elizabeth's words that the very situation that was tearing Mary's life apart was God's blessing were just what Mary needed, so that she too was filled with the Holy Spirit and began to sing. We call her song the Magnificat, from the words, "My soul glorifies, or magnifies, the Lord." Here was Mary, unmarried and pregnant, facing rejection by her friends and family and the loss of her marriage to Joseph, and she's singing joyfully about all the great things the Lord has done for her.

She wasn't singing a lullaby about little Jesus in a manger "no crying he makes," or about the sweet wonders of motherhood. She sang of God's mercy coming through this child, about confidence in God's power and justice. She sang a song of resistance against power structures and policies that keep the poor poor while the rich get richer, resistance against the arrogant who use their power for harm. Against those who would dare to deny the poor and the hungry what they need while they have more than they can ever use. She sang of how God had knocked the powerful down and raised the humble. All the verbs in Mary's song are in the past tense as though everything she sang about had already happened. With God's Son in her womb, Mary understood that she was now a part of what God was doing and will do through this child. Her belief was so strong, that only time separated God's promises from their fulfillment and she chose to live into those promises even before they happened. Mary was Jesus' first disciple, following in his footsteps before he even learned to walk.

And so, during Advent, even we Protestants pay attention to Mary. We join Mary's song, calling upon the God who knocks down arrogant powers, raises the humble, feeds the hungry, and provides for the poor. We remember those suffer, share with those who don't have enough, weep with those who mourn. And we dare to sing confidently of God's promise to change the world. And, like Mary, when we do, God allows us to be a part of accomplishing his promises- to feed those who hunger, heal the brokenhearted, touch the lonely, comfort the grieving, to bring justice and peace. We get to tell of God's love to people who can't believe such a promise can be true. Like Mary, our very lives become songs of praise.

How will we join Mary's song this Advent? It may be something heroic and profound like Mother Teresa serving the poor of Calcutta but it doesn't need to be. Mary and Elizabeth were called to be mothers of special babies, give them birth, and homes to grow up in. What about us? Where can we enter the work? This box of gifts is a beautiful way, and I thank everyone who sang Mary's song by sharing with those who don't have enough. Our gifts to Tent City 4, and the Union Gospel

Mission in Seattle, and Mary's Place are other ways we sing. Every donation to the food bank lets us join God's work in feeding the hungry and the poor. All the time you spend visiting our homebound members, sending cards of encouragement, or visiting your own neighbors living near you- it's all singing with Mary. Rob and I will have a neighbor who's single with no family join us for Christmas dinner, and we are praying that he will sense the love of the One born of Mary in Bethlehem. I will be taking cookies and invitations to our Christmas Eve service to Tent City 4 this week. Will you join me in praying that some will come and hear about the love of God through you and me?

In a few moments we will be singing a hymn about Mary's faith sung to the familiar tune of Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing. It will remind us that Mary's faith was not just for Jesus' birth, she followed her Son through all of her life, from his birth, through his ministry, to faithfully standing near the cross as she watched him die, and as a witness of the early church. Mary was a woman blessed with faith, who sang with joy, and she invites us to join her song. Our world needs to hear Mary's song of the God who brings hope, and justice, love and mercy.