Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

December 20, 2020

*“Blessed Singer, Blessed Song”*

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Have you ever thought what it was like to have been Mary? Every year, as the story of Advent unfolds, I think we do think about Mary, but only in terms of her carrying the Christ child. She is, or has been called, a holy vessel, and this is a good and beautiful thing but she is also more than this. She was a woman, a person, and so, I found myself wondering about Mary’s personhood this year as I read through this passage.

Mary was a young woman—a very young woman—when the Angel Gabriel came upon her telling her that she was going to conceive and bear a child. It made me wonder what it was like for her. How did she receive Gabriel’s news for her? Was she really as calm and collected as she seems in this passage? When asked to be the *theotokos—*the God-bearer, how did she find the courage to say yes?

I find myself especially wondering what was it like for her to hear God’s plan for her - because over the centuries, there have been many depictions of what this was like, this meeting between Mary and the Angel Gabriel. It has been a favorite among painters of religious scenes for many, many years. Each age has found its own way of conveying this story, and just about all the paintings I have seen depict a placid Mary receiving the news from a splendid, but benign-looking Gabriel.

There are only two depictions I have seen that offer-up a different experience. One is in an old Basque carol that depicts the angel as having “wings of drifted snow and eyes of flame.” It’s the “eyes of flame” part that has always given me pause because it suggests an imposing being who is not at all ordinary, nor terribly comfortable to be around. In fact, I’ve always found Gabriel’s description, in the carol at least, to be a little scary.

The other depiction of this scene that stands out for me is from a made for television movie-series about the life of Christ. It was made in 1977 by the Italian director, Franco Zeffirelli. His film is simply called “Jesus of Nazareth.”

When it’s time for the Annunciation, Zeffirelli did not show an embodied Gabriel. Instead, Zeffirelli’s Gabriel is light and wind that comes upon Mary as she sleeps. It wakes her as it makes God’s actions known to her.

At first, Mary is terrified and she tries to run and hide from this “force” that is demanding her attention. As light and wind pursues her, and tells her more of the message from God for her, Gabriel’s presence becomes less and less frightening. Finally, she understands the importance of the message and she calms down to receive it with awe and wonder.

I have always found that depiction to be much more real and plausible. After all, Mary was, as I’ve been saying, very young. She was probably quite unsophisticated, even unschooled, as a young woman living in a small town would be at that time. Moreover, the situation Gabriel was suggesting—to become pregnant before she was officially married—this was against the norms of behavior and propriety among women of hertime. Such a situation would have put her at great risk.

In fact, in the Gospel of Matthew, Joseph has to have his own angel visit before he can accept Mary’s pregnancy. Before that, he was ready to discard her—to leave her disgraced, even if he intended to do it quietly and without publicly rebuking her.

Here in the Gospel of Luke, we do not get to hear about Joseph, quite yet, at all. We only hear about Mary and her experience.

So we hear having learned about her own condition and that of her cousin, Elizabeth, Mary does something else I have always found amazing: Luke tells us that she goes off to visit her cousin Elizabeth in the hill country.

I find it this amazing because, as I have been saying, she is a young woman—actually she’s more of a girl than a woman. As a young woman still living in her father’s house, Mary would have had a definite place in the family, and a whole list of chores and responsibilities that she was expected to fulfill. She did not have the kind of autonomy we think of women, even young women, having today. As a young *unmarried* woman, I imagine she had even less. Yet, here she is, in this chapter of Luke, going off to visit Elizabeth to see for herself this thing that has happened for her cousin. Obviously, Gabriel’s visit has inspired her to act beyond what would have been her normal behavior and demeanor.

God’s work is already at work in Mary’s heart and in her mind. So, off she goes.

What Mary finds with Elizabeth corroborates the experience that she has had, and it astounds and moves her. It also seems to astound the baby in Elizabeth’s womb who leaps for joy at the sound of Mary’s voice.

As all of this unfolds before her, Mary is suddenly moved to song—and so she sings the Magnificat—a song of wonder and praise.

That is, it begins as a song of praise for God but then it becomes a song that tells of reversals that will come into the life of the human community because of this child. So she sings of how God is going to bring upheaval and revolution into the world. It is a song that sings the power of God’s blessing—so powerful that it can even make deep changes for good in human relationships.

Mary also sings of the privilege given to her to bear the promised Messiah. For Mary, humble as she is, her lowly status is nothing less than a for-shadowing of what is to come.

“From now on,” she sings, “all generations will call me blessed.” [v. 48] This child of hers is going to transform the world—just as he has already transformed her.

Lest we begin to think Mary has become puffed-up with self-importance, the rest of her song tells of how what has happened for her is also going to happen for all people. Through the Christ Child, the powerful will be brought low and the lowly will be lifted-up.

Mary sings about how the systems of power and privilege that now rule the world, crushing the poor and the powerless. This will come to an end—all old power arrangements are going to be remade.

This new relationship between people is the fruit of God’s mercy, which shatters all institutions of injustice that threaten and imprison, that corrupts and perverts life. It is God’s mercy—embodied and coming into the world—that is going to break-open the iron grip of all that persecutes and tyrannizes.

Indeed, Mary *rejoices* at the downfall of the arrogant powerful. They will be displaced from their abuse. All their trappings of authority—all pretensions to supremacy—will be shown up as the corruption and sham that they are, and they will be discarded.

These old ways of injustice are going to be dismantled by God’s love for *all* people. God’s love is going to do that—as it has already done in Mary’s life.

As we have seen, suddenly, Mary is *not* the young girl she was. She is, indeed, a young *woman*, a woman who has opened her life to the gift of life God has given her, and which is now growing in her womb. She has fully received this gift and because she has, she is changed; she is transformed—just as the world will be.

As one commentator has written: *Mary’s song is part of a long history of how God has used those who will let their lives be larger than themselves, who will see their strength not in their own accomplishment but in accepting their place in that larger work, who will not grab power for themselves but will use power for good, and who see these blessings as reason enough for all to receive.*

The Magnificat is a song of freedom and justice for all people. However, there is also an implication within the song, which is threaded through our life, and especially our life of faith. What is implied in this story, and in every other story of faith, hope, and peace is the question about who we will love.

Further, we are asked whether or not we will allow the love of God to come first in our life—are we willing to stake everything in order to receive and live through God’s love? Will we put the content of that love—God’s love of honesty and integrity and justice—before we put this before all other interests that try to claim that place with us?

This is what Mary said yes to—she gave her very body in order to birth God’s love. She said yes, and she breathed her life into God’s love, even as she sang God’s love.

This is what is coming into the world through Mary—God’s embodied love. And Christ, too, will answer “yes” to that question; “yes” to God’s purpose and promises.

So, the question becomes: How will we answer? My prayer is that I will answer “yes,” and that you will, too.

I pray that our “yes” to God’s love will become a mighty chorus singing God’s blessing, justice, and peace until love rings in the ears, and fills the hearts of all people.

I pray that we will give thanks for Mary, the blessed singer, and her song.

May it be so. Amen.