

Sermon: December 21, 2014 (Advent IV) – Luke 1: 46-55
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

Today is the fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Love. More specifically, though, this is the Sunday of Mary, mother of Jesus. In the words that Luke hears her sing, which we heard as our gospel reading this morning, hope is proclaimed to all who are marginalized, disempowered or overlooked.

But what do we actually know about Mary? In her book entitled *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus*, Beverly Roberts Gaventa is able to distil everything we know about Mary in any historical sense into a single paragraph (pp.4-5). She writes,

“Even if we take all of the available scraps of evidence as historically reliable, [which is problematic, since even these bits carry theological freight], what emerges is slender indeed: the mother of Jesus was named Mary [or in Aramaic, Mariam]. At the time of Jesus’ conception, she was a resident of Nazareth in the region of Galilee, although Matthew suggests Bethlehem as her home. She was engaged to and eventually married Joseph, and later she gave birth to other children (unless the brothers and sisters of Jesus are to be regarded as children of Joseph from a previous marriage or even perhaps as cousins). We are given the names of no other relatives except that of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, who was her cousin. [She was a devout Jew, and her] sacrifice of turtledoves or pigeons [rather than a sheep] following Jesus’ birth suggests that she was from a poor family.”

With so little specific information about Mary, Professor Gaventa goes on to examine about the *role of women in general* in Jewish society of the day, but there’s not much there either. Much of the information is from at least 200 years later, and nearly all of it comes from male rabbis stating the letter of the law, rather than the way they actually were in day-to-day practice. So the official sources imply that women and girls lived much of their lives in the household, away from the eyes of men, yet numerous references in the Bible casually suggest that women moved freely and were actively involved in commerce. And when it comes to broader sources that can help us answer our questions about how a young betrothed girl in those days would approach the news that she was pregnant, there is nothing. All we have on that topic is written in the ancient Jewish laws, or the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke.

So when you add up the specific information about the mother of Jesus – which seems a bit dubious – and the contextual information about Jewish women in that day – which is nearly non-existent – we end up having to face the facts. That is, that virtually everything we know about Mary is Theology, rather than History.

Pierce Pettis has written a lovely song entitled Miriam, which does a wonderful job at outlining some of the ways that Mary’s image has been theologized and westernized over the years, and the importance of her courage in embracing God’s mission in the world. I’ve got a video for us to see, combining this song with images from “The Nativity Story.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Mi0xsSAfIE>

As Pierce Pettis sung so poignantly, “there was one sure miracle: the faith of a little girl named Miriam”. As the story unfolds in the gospel of Luke, Mary was willing to trust the unbelievable words of the Angel, and open herself to become the embodiment of all who are empowered by God in challenging circumstances. Mary’s voice, from this moment on, speaks on behalf of all who are regarded by the world as powerless or inconsequential. In the beautiful words of the Magnificat, so named for its first word in Latin, Mary gives voice to everyone in history – in particular, every woman in history – who has attempted to bring honour to God in the midst of being trampled by those around them. The song that Luke has connected to her, has strong, visceral echoes of a song sung centuries earlier by Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, and that connection tells us that

Mary's voice is intended to reach back into the ages, even as it reaches forward to challenge our attitudes and actions.

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 he sounds themes that will appear again and again: they see Luke's emphasis on women, the marginalized, and the Holy Spirit all evident in the birth narratives [and] Mary, filled with the Holy Spirit, gives voice to those who are lowly. Or in the words of Fred Craddock, (p.29) "What God has done for Mary anticipates and models what God will do [in Christ Jesus] for the poor, the powerless, and the oppressed of the world." Indeed, 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.

When we hear that divine agenda, we open our eyes and our ears and our lives to what God has planned through Mary and the child growing inside her: 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 turn on the news, each time we examine the world around us and wonder where God is calling us to be. And, point out Borg and Crossan (p.116), Mary's willingness to open herself to God's will – whatever that Divine mystery has in store for her – has become a model over the centuries, for anyone seeking spiritual openness to God's will.

Quoting now from a sermon that my spouse, Shannon Mang preached some 21 years ago "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 the poor, and the poor are both the bearers and midwives who birth God into the world."

"It has been the poor who have shown me my own poverty, poverty of a different sort, by sharing so generously the wealth they have from God. One night I was in the middle of eating a meal where two of the four chickens that ranged in a [Filipino] peasant's small yard had been killed for supper on behalf of us Canadian visitors. These people did not own the land they lived on, their furnishings consisted of a camp stove and cobbled-together picnic table, their clothing was the kind of stuff most people tear into rags, so in sharing supper with us we were in essence being given half of all they had. I suddenly was struck with the realization that there is no way I would share half of *my* possessions with total strangers who had come to visit me. In contrast with the generosity of the poor, I came face to face with my poverty of generosity and hospitality."

Time and again, God chooses the powerless of our world to be those who bear the promise. That's why twelve-step groups have such transformative energy: they're made up of people who have come face to face with their powerlessness, and have learned a lesson available to all but heard most easily by the desperate: that God's love is the source of all life, that God's power is what makes life manageable at all. It's why people who have been looked down on or excluded at some point in their life often make such good and true friends: they know what it is like to have a poverty of friendships, and what a treasure it is to have someone break through that poverty. It's why God chooses to use not just our strengths but our weaknesses: because we, and those around us, grow the most when we realize that we don't have it all together.

As evidenced in the work of Beverly Roberts Gaventa, in the Bible and other historical sources we are not given us one identifiable snapshot of Mary. But if we receive Mary's song, as a song of solidarity that sings across the nations and the ages, we can see Mary anywhere: as a street child eking out an existence in Bolivia; or a schoolgirl in Pakistan caught in the midst of gunfire; or an obedient daughter heading from the Filipino countryside to seek work in Manila, or Tokyo, or the Bow Valley; or a teenage aboriginal girl from Winnipeg wondering if she will be the next to be attacked. Mary's plea is visible in all these girls' lives. If we listen close enough, the Magnificat is still being voiced, by expectant mothers with big dreams of what their baby will contribute to the

world; by teenaged moms enduring the dirty looks and sneers of those who look down on them; and by impoverished mothers worried at how likely it is that their children will be targeted by violence. The song of Mary, sung in the voice of these modern-day mothers, women and girls, encourages us in our desire to take up Christ's fully-embodied mission with the poor. The song still comes to us, as a challenging gift from the Divine source of love. May we have the ears to hear it and the heart to embrace it. Amen.

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