

Hail Mary Strong and Sure

Over the last four weeks we have been traveling a journey that moves us from longing to anticipation; a long-awaited guest is about to arrive.

On Sunday morning we will be swept up in Mary's bold faith and courage; it is her strength, faith and daring that brings us to the threshold of Jesus' birth.

Luke's is the only gospel in which Mary's story appears, and in his account, there is nothing submissive or immature about her.

According to Luke, God's messenger approached her with words of great honor: Hail Mary, full of grace. Many artists paint the angel kneeling, in recognition of the honor given to her.

The angel is explicit; the honor is for the grace that is distinctly hers. Her culture or the powers that be might not see any value in her, but God sees in Mary someone of immense worth.^[1]

It is Mary's grace that has attracted God's attention.

And what is this grace?

It is what Luke shows us in her speech and her actions – courage, boldness, grit; her ringing convictions about justice. There is no submissive meekness here. Grace is not submission. And someone who is willing to harness the justice of God is never docile.

Now I must confess that early in my own faith journey Mary and I were uneasy companions. The BVM, as she is sometimes known, seemed to me a curiosity at best and an excuse to keep women subservient at worst.

“Look at Mary's unwavering obedience” and keep your mouth shut woman!” was the message many women, including myself, have heard over the years in churches all over the world.

But if we take a closer look at Mary as we find her in Luke's description and put away all of the unfortunate dross that has been piled up around her until she has become utterly obscured by superstition or misogyny, we find a compelling figure who teaches us how to have unwavering participation with God's call for justice and hope.

Peel away the nonsense and we see in Mary a young woman of immense courage who made up her own mind to say “yes” to God outside the law of her people and in doing so, risked everything. She did this without heed to what it would cost her socially, publicly, and spiritually.^[2]

And of course, we have spilled a lot of blood, sweat and tears as well as written pages and pages of doctrine around this notion of a “virgin birth.” I have no argument as to whether it was a miracle.

But this is just more static added to Mary's story---because to me the real miracle isn't around how Jesus was conceived, but around the fact that in a culture where Mary's unplanned pregnancy should have spelled a horrible death or expulsion and shame, somehow this young woman was allowed to live and give birth to God's hope for the human family.

God always chooses the most unlikely suspects as agents of transformation and hope. Mary's story reminds us that God can use all of us to extraordinary purpose if we claim her courage and join our voices to those who sing out the bold demand for God's justice and liberation.

In Mary we are reminded that we should expect God to show up where poor people are forgotten, vulnerable people are oppressed, and weak people are overlooked.

Mary reminds us that we too are called to bear God into the world.

Here we stand, trembling on the brink of celebrating the moment that God become flesh and blood.

Through Mary's fierce persistence and survival against threat she shows us how to give birth to God in our own lives.

I am reminded of Meister Eckhart, the medieval mystic and theologian who wrote: “We are all meant to be mothers of God.”

^[1] Nancy McKinnon

^[2] Joan Chittister, *In Search of Belief, Ligouri/Triumph, Missouri, 1999, pg. 95.*

What good is it to me," he continued, "if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace?

What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to a Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and culture? This then," he writes, "is the fullness of time:

When the Son of God --- is begotten in each of us."

Mary is our guide and template on this dangerous journey. She travels alone or in harsh conditions and she defies the demand that she should be seen and not heard. She is not subservient, submissive, or helpless. She is determined, free, holy, and strong as nails.

She beckons women and men everywhere to speak out for God's justice. God's justice is born into the world every time and any time people of Mary's courage break out of conformity, fear, or cultural constraint and dare to give voice and action to God's call to put an end to the needless suffering of poverty, oppression and greed.

For many that may mean speaking boldly from an oppressed position even as people say your voice or your life does not matter. For others it may mean stepping down from a place of privilege and daring to face the truth that from this place of privilege we play a part of the injustice in the world.

Mary meets us at that tremulous intersection where our longing for a better world is transformed into anticipation that God is present when each of us, in our own way, breaks free of imposed convention and dares to give birth to justice, compassion and peace on the Earth.

May we all be Mary-strong! Stephanie+